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HOODOO CURU

JT puts the boot into 20 years of pain and suffering
+ Matt Scott opens up on his agony before NQ's ecstasy

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THE MIRACLE THAT ALMOST NEVER HAPPENED

Cowboys grand final hero could have been lost to rugby – or the Rabbitohs – earlier this year

BY TONY ADAMS & JOEL GOULD



THE COWBOYS ALMOST LOST MIRACLE-MAKING winger Kyle Feldt early this season.

Unable to break into North Queensland's top side for most of the season, a frustrated Feldt was considering his options and even got a 'feeler' from South Sydney.

Former North Queensland defensive coach Peter Ryan also tried to recruit the 23-year-old to the ACT Brumbies when he joined the Super 15 outfit as an assistant to coach Stephen Larkham this year.

With the Rabbitohs struggling for strike power out wide, they almost made a formal move for Feldt, whose last-second try took last Sunday's epic grand final into extra time . . . and wrote Feldt's name into footy folklore.

"We could have lost him," a Cowboys insider tells *RLW*.

"He was frustrated at not being able to break into the team after playing some good footy last season. But he's a local boy and we persuaded him he had a future here."

Feldt spent four months in the Intrust Super Cup, with coach Paul Green preferring the more experienced Antonio Winterstein, Justin O'Neill and Matthew Wright for the wing spots.

"I had 18 games in the Queensland Cup. It felt longer than 18 games," Feldt said at the time of his recall in August.

"I had to stick it out and wait for an opportunity to come."

Green told the 23-year-old Feldt to work on his defence and ball security and the young flanker bided his time for the Townsville Blackhawks, patiently waiting for a chance.

And when it came, against the Warriors in round 24, Feldt scored a hat-trick – and didn't look back.

In the grand final, he won himself a place in Cowboys folklore for his last-minute ball strip on Ben Hunt, his last-second try and his spiral kick-off to start extra-time, which Hunt knocked on.

Feldt played only nine games in the top grade but produced a handsome return of eight tries – including the one that propelled the Cowboys to their historic premiership win. Feldt's talent was well-known to Ryan when he targeted him for the Brumbies.

"I was keen to bring him down because I didn't think he was getting a fair go up there," Ryan says.

"I knew he had another year on his contract but it wouldn't have mattered because if he was coming to rugby union they couldn't hold him to it.

"I had a chat to him and tried to get him interested in coming to the Brumbies, but he said, 'No, I'm going to stick it out and try and fight my way back into the team'. I just said, 'Good on you, mate. That's a real credit to you'. Feldt says league is in his heart and that hard work has got him a premiership.

"I'm a rugby league boy from North Queensland and I don't think I will ever play rugby union, to be honest," he says.

"When I was out of the team I dug deep and did a lot of work on my ball-handling skills at the Blackhawks and it has all paid off. I've got a premiership ring now. It doesn't get any better than this."

Cowboys football manager Peter Parr says there's a lot to like about Feldt's story.

"Kyle didn't drop his bottom lip after he had an unhappy game against the Broncos in round three," Parr says.

"He got put back to Queensland Cup and worked really hard on his game. When he came back he knew what he had to do and, to his great credit, he did it."





Sleepless giant

Jason Taumalolo opens up about the two sleepless nights that changed his career and delivered a premiership ring

BY JOEL GOULD

IN THE EARLY HOURS OF last Sunday morning, Cowboys wrecking ball Jason Taumalolo lay awake staring the ceiling.

His room-mate James Tamou was sound asleep but Taumalolo was wide-eyed, unable to shake the memory of his nightmare trip to a season decider in the Under-20s

four years earlier. The Cowboys behemoth doesn't usually have trouble nodding off.

Most night he sleeps like a 112kg baby.

The last time he remembers struggling to doze off was four months ago when he had all but signed a two-year, \$2 million deal to join the Warriors.

He had the pen at hand and was ready to do the deed, but wanted to sleep on his decision.

But there was no sleep. Just a night of restless agony where he reflected on his future.

Auckland-born Taumalolo had a desire to return to his homeland but at the same time he had found a home at the Cowboys.

"I almost put pen to paper to

sign with the Warriors, that's how close I was," he says. "Then I told my management I would sleep a night on it and sign the next day if I thought that was where I wanted to take my career path.

"That was the biggest moment of my career.

"I didn't sleep at all. I lay awake in bed and the thought of leaving the club was spinning around in my head.

"I was thinking about all the support I had back in New Zealand, but I call Townsville home and I was thinking about all the wonderful people and coaches who have helped shape my career.

"I just love the Cowboys culture and what Greeny (coach Paul Green) had planned for me.

"I looked at that and thought that suited me and my footy career.

"So the next day I decided to re-sign with the Cowboys. It has paid off. I gave up close to a million (dollars) but now I have got this ring on my finger."

The night before his barnstorming performance in last Sunday's grand final, Taumalolo was wide-eyed again. He was thinking about the one thing he had tried to blot from his mind.

"I tried to go to bed earlier than I usually do," he says. "I was wide awake and I couldn't sleep, just thinking about the grand final.

"In the 2011 Under-20s grand final we lost in overtime by a field goal to the Warriors, and that was playing on my mind.

LAY BACK AND ENJOY IT!

Jason Taumalolo makes the world's largest confetti angel after a dominant display in last Sunday's decider.



IT'S FUTURE WAS ALWAYS BRIGHT ... EVEN IN THE DARK

IT WAS FITTING THAT THE LIGHTS were turned off at ANZ Stadium when Johnathan Thurston was presented with the Clive Churchill Medal and his NRL premiership ring.

Because it was when the lights were turned off by the secretary at his old junior club, Souths Sunnybank, after training that a 12-year-old Thurston would relentlessly practise field goals and sideline conversions in the dark when others had gone home. Goals that he imagined in his mind's eye were for a future premiership.

"If there was a kid who was going to make it just through his sheer love of the game, it was Johnathan," JT's old junior coach Mark Beaumont says. "After training his mum and dad would be in the clubhouse and the lights on the ground would get turned off. It was dark except for a dim glow from the club, but Johnathan would be there whacking goals and field goals over."

Thurston had dreamed of his grand final heroics as a youngster, as so many budding stars do.

"That's what you do as a kid," Thurston says. "I was Mal Meninga, because I was a big Raiders fan growing up. I was a big Queensland fan as well, so I would be Alfie and Kevvie. I'd run around pretending I was those guys."

"The Souths Sunnybank football club — the junior coaches I had and people that were there — are the ones that helped develop me at a very young age. That's where it really all started for me. I remember those days practising kicking, drop-kicks and goal kicks, and that was a big part of my development as a rugby league player."

The old ground he once roamed in the evenings was last year named Johnathan Thurston Field.

"Johnathan came to that naming and was very proud of it. He always remembers where he is from," Beaumont says. "He wasn't born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He worked hard for everything he has got. A premiership is what he richly deserves."

JOEL GOULD

"But when I woke up I had a good chat to James. We spoke about the game and how much we wanted it to win a premiership for the Cowboys."

Taumalolo is a man of faith, and he says faith is why he's now a premiership winner.

"Greeny believed in me when Neil Henry didn't," he says.

"He always said that if I could play consistent footy that I would have a good career."

"He held me accountable for my performances. That's when I play my best."

"He benched me for the last two end-of-season games, but I knew he believed in me."

"Then he started me in the finals, and now I have been able to repay him."



'You get numbness and tingles down your arm. It's been constant most of the year'

Cowboys warhorse Matt Scott finally opens up on the agony he played through to win the 2015 title **BY JOEL GOULD**

THE CONSTANT PAIN AND NUMBNESS DOWN

his left arm would have ended the season of most players. But Cowboys prop Matt Scott has not flinched once.

Basking in premiership glory after the Cowboys' maiden grand final victory, the 30-year-old warhorse confirmed what we all suspected. He has played through more agony due to a neck injury than he'd ever let on while there was footy to be played . . . and a premiership to be won.

But playing through pain is nothing new for Scott.

Remarkably, he secured his first contract with the Cowboys 13 years ago after a man-of-the-match performance with a busted knee in front of former coach Graham Murray and current football manager Peter Parr. They signed a teenager who has grown into a fantastic leader — and a man who has set the benchmark for toughness.

"I will get surgery at the end of this month and it's well and truly time," Scott says, in the understatement of the grand final. "I'm looking forward to getting it fixed because it's been a few years of a fair bit of pain. The reality is when you get a pinched nerve (in the neck) you get numbness and tingles down your arm. It's pretty much constant at the moment and has been for most of the year."

"It's something I've worked through but I've lost a fair bit of strength there."

Scott was 18th man in the Cowboys' 2005 grand final squad and knew his shot at premiership glory was running out.

"Ten years later we have finally got back here, so to win it is extremely satisfying," he says.

"I'm extremely proud of the playing group and the club that we have been able to put this all together."

Scott has always pulled together for his team-mates — as his former schoolboy coach at St Brendan's College Yeppoon, Terry Hansen, reveals.

"Matt plays through pain every week," Hansen says. "He did it for me in a Confraternity Shield final when we were down to 14 players. We initially thought he'd done his ACL and his knee was all bunged. I asked him if he'd play on one leg and he just said, 'No worries'. We strapped it up and he won the game for us. Graham Murray and Peter Parr were standing beside me that day and Muzza signed him up that afternoon. The rest is history. Matt is just so determined to succeed. That's his secret. He's a special human."

But Scott never felt special as a footy player.

"I didn't consider rugby league as an option for a career until halfway through Grade 12," he says.

"I didn't know much about the NRL. I didn't watch it as a kid growing up and I didn't have much of an idea how it all worked. I was lucky that Terry Hansen gave me a scholarship to go to St Brendan's, play Confraternity Shield and all of a sudden I had offers from Canberra and the Cowboys. Peter Parr signed me from Confraternity in Charters Towers and all of a sudden I was moving to Townsville and I had a contract. Graham Murray was the coach, and I owe him a huge debt for giving me my chance in the NRL."

"I'm extremely lucky and blessed."

RLW COLUMNIST



Sam Thaiday

This pain will make us better players

We're gutted by the grand final – but we don't have to look far for motivation in 2016

AFTER THAT grand final, I'm absolutely knackered – and very upset. The game was there to be won and one minute was all it took.

Wayne spoke to us all at the end of the game and said he doesn't want to take this hurt and this pain away, because it's only going to make us better players next year. If we remember that hurt and that pain, we'll want to work harder to make sure we're the ones sitting on that stage at the end of the grand final next year.

Was it consolation that my mate JT won the title? Yes and no.

As a team and as a squad we've worked so hard ourselves this year and we wanted to have our own fairytale. I share a great bond and a great mateship with JT and it's great to see him have success, but on the other hand, it's very disappointing for Justin Hodges, for Wayne Bennett, and for our whole squad who have tried so hard to be in the position we're in.

Was it consolation that the game will be remembered as one of the greatest grand finals of all time? Again, yes and no. And I hope people do remember it – it's a pretty significant moment. Two Queensland-based teams playing in a



grand final is pretty significant in itself.

At the end of the day, we'll be a part of history.

But for the time being, for this moment in time, it really hurts. We'll sit back and we'll reflect on how our whole year's been. We had a lot of doubters at the start of the year – South Sydney did a fair job on us in round one and a lot of people put a line through us back then, so we were pretty impressed with

the way we stood up as a team this year.

It's been a long year, and a very up-and-down year for me personally.

It was a rough start to the year, getting dropped to the bench. It wouldn't have been fair for Wayne to put that pressure on a younger guy, so myself being a senior player, he really pushed me and made everyone see that they're accountable for their job and their role in the team.

To do that to a younger player would have really scarred them and dented their development. But myself, I could handle that. I worked hard to bounce back and have a pretty successful year.

That helped set up some standards at our club – everyone knew that we were accountable. No matter if you were an older player or a younger player, you had to make sure you were doing your job. And that's why we had such great success this year.

As the year went on, I formed a really good front-row bond with Adam Blair. He worked his butt off and he wasn't far off getting the Churchill Medal around his neck – he was probably the best player on the field, he just wasn't on the victorious team.

I really feel for Josh McGuire – we missed him big time. Hopefully he'll bounce back from this

Achilles injury and I know he'll want that chance to win a grand final. He'll be one of our best players next year, for sure.

Ben Hunt will be fine. A bit of time spent with family and I'm sure once we have a real think about it he'll be fine.

Maybe I'll appreciate this grand final when I retire. It will be raw for a couple of weeks and then I'm sure we'll go again in 2016. **RLW**

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SOWIE ON THE OUTER

STAR PLAYMAKER JAMIE SOWARD could become the latest big name to leave the Panthers in the post-season. Two NRL clubs have told me they've been offered Soward for next year – even though he's under contract until the end of 2017.

Soward had a sensational first year with Penrith in 2014, helping the Panthers to within a game of the grand final, but struggled with injury this year and wasn't quiet able to re-produce the magic. At 30, his best days are probably behind him, and there are plenty who believe superstar fullback Matt Moylan's best position is five-eighth. On top of that, the Panthers have signed highly-rated Kiwi Te Maire Martin from the Tigers for the next three years.

The Panthers have made a habit of releasing star talent and relying on younger, cheaper players to fill the void. In recent seasons, the likes of Michael Jennings, Luke Lewis, Lachlan Coote, Michael Gordon, Travis Burns and Trent Waterhouse have left the club as the Panthers have battled to overcome salary-cap problems created by the previous administration.

And now it seems Soward may join that list – if a rival club is willing to pick up his sizeable wage bill.



TRICKY WIKI

Johnathan Thurston's starring display in the grand final strengthened his case to become a future *RLW* Immortal. But someone jumped the gun and edited the Wikipedia page of the Immortals, inserting Thurston's name as the ninth Immortal . . . before the error was rectified.

JAMMED BY JASON

Cowboys premiership-winning powerhouse **Jason Taumalolo** is now hard as nails and has shed the puppy fat that once impeded his fitness and defensive efforts. The 22-year-old still remembers the days when former Cowboys defensive coach **Peter Ryan** would spar with him in the gym and

TIM'S TIMELY HONOUR

You have to laugh at rugby league. Two years ago, the Tigers sacked long-time coach **Tim Sheens** and the dispute turned sour, with Sheens taking legal action against the club for unpaid wages. But then last week, on the 10th anniversary of the Tigers' 2005 grand final win, the club made Sheens a life member. Sheens has moved on and is far from bitter with the Tigers. "It's a great honour and I'm happy to accept it," he told me from the UK. The four-time premiership-winning coach resigned as Kangaroos coach last week to become Salford's full-time director of football.



BEN'S BACKING

There was plenty of love for grand final villain **Ben Hunt** in the Broncos sheds after the grand final. Hunt memorably spilled the Steeden off the kick-off in golden point, and also conceded a crucial penalty for a dangerous throw in the dying minutes and had the ball stolen by **Kyle Feldt** moments later to set up the Cowboys' match-levelling try. Four-time premierships halfback and Channel Nine commentator **Peter Sterling** was spotted consoling Hunt in the rooms post-match, while Rabbitohs and Maroons superstar **Greg Inglis** also rallied around his fellow Queenslander. Hunt was comforted by his girlfriend **Bridget Hagan** and a circle of close friends post-game in the surprisingly upbeat Broncos sheds. "He's a fighter, mate," Brisbane enforcer **Adam Blair** tells me. "He'll be back bigger and better."



goad him to throw punches at him. When Taumalolo unleashed, Ryan was the one glad that he stopped. "I did a boxing session with him one day and I was sparring with him," Ryan recalls. "He was reticent to throw any punches but I said, 'I'll be throwing them when you're not throwing them'. I got him up under the ribs a couple of times and hit him harder than he expected. Then he started throwing them and I was pretty happy when he stopped. Jason was raw but he has refined his game now so he isn't a liability in defence. He just didn't understand his role. We did a lot of contact sessions with him so that when he got to the games he'd done the hard work. We used to put him in the sandpit and make him run and make tackles on blokes that were just as big as him."

A GOOD REED

Brad Izzard is a Panthers legend – and he was a proud man after the Holden Cup grand final last Sunday. Izzard, a star of the Panthers' maiden premiership in 1991, watched with pride as his nephew **Reed Izzard** proved a key figure as

HOT GOSSIP

Lachlan Coote has shot down speculation he wants to leave the Cowboys when his three-year contract runs out at the end of next season. Rumours have been rife that the grand final-winning fullback Coote and partner Laura are homesick and want to return to Sydney. "I really want to see out that contract," he says. "I think once we get into the next pre-season there will be a possibility that we'll do a new deal earlier. I don't know where the talk that I wanted to leave came from. I can't emphasise it enough that I want to stay. The club has been so good to me and we've got a great bunch of blokes up there. It's definitely something I want to be a part of in the future."

Laurie Daley gets the clairvoyant award for grand final week. The Blues coach went on TV a good 72 hours before the decider and declared the Cowboys would win in extra time with a Johnathan Thurston field goal . . . and that JT would get the Clive Churchill Medal. Now that is impressive!

THIS ONE'S FOR YOU, ALEX

THERE WAS JOY AND ELATION IN the Cowboys' sheds after last Sunday's historic win – but also a few tears.

Several young Cowboys took time out to remember team-mate Alex Elisala, who tragically took his own life in 2013. Elisala played alongside many of the Cowboys' best youngsters in the Holden Cup from 2010-12 and players even had little posters of him in their lockers at ANZ Stadium as a tribute to their mate, ensuring he will never be forgotten.



Last gasp hero Michael Morgan (above) was one of Elisala's closest mates and admitted earlier this year he lost the enjoyment of playing when the rising star committed suicide, only regaining the passion months later.

Penrith won the NYC grand final 34-18 against Manly in emphatic style. A talented lock, Izzard is said to have a big future at Penrith. His dad **Craig Izzard** was also a handy footballer, playing 117 games in the back row for Penrith, Parramatta, Balmain and Illawarra.

BAILING ON BAILS

Former Knight **Chris Bailey** discovered the hard way that you're quickly forgotten once you retire. After playing his final game for Huddersfield last Thursday night, the team bus drove off without him on board! He was spotted on his mobile phone outside Wigan's DW Stadium, asking his team-mates to return and collect him!

SAINTS GO MARCHING IN

While the Cowboys, Broncos and Roosters will play in the three-game World Club Series in the UK next February, the Super League sides are yet to be confirmed. Challenge Cup winners Leeds are into the grand final with Wigan, securing two of the three spots. But the third position will be decided by the RFL board. Of the two losing semi-finalists, Huddersfield finished highest on the ladder (third) – but my spies tell me fourth-placed St Helens, who have much stronger support, will get the spot. Saints are likely to face Sydney Roosters in the opening game, with the two grand finalists from each competition meeting on successive nights.



ROBBIE'S RED V RAKE SWAP

Talk of a hooker swap between the Tigers and Dragons won't go away. **Robbie Farah's** position at the Tigers is untenable and the Dragons may be willing to pick him up in exchange for **Mitch Rein**. Souths were somewhat interested in Farah – but the Rabbitohs are now set to sign Bulldogs rake **Damien Cook** instead, ending that avenue.



Chance of Robbie Farah playing for the Dragons in 2016


**BRIAN
SMITH**


NORTH QUEENSLAND HAVE BEEN PREPARING FOR THEIR LAST-MINUTE VICTORY ALL SEASON

WOW! WHAT A GAME . . . and what an advertisement for our great game. As if scripted, the greatest player of the past decade, Johnathan Thurston, had the chance to win it . . . not once but twice. He missed his first chance. Champions don't miss twice.

While the commentators tried to figure out what the motives of the footy gods might be, JT and his crew just got back to work and got on with doing what they've done so

many times this season — *finding a way to win*. And coming from behind to do it has been their speciality.

Kyle Feldt's try to level it up showed us that instinct in attacking footy is still king in our game . . . or at least it should be. So much talk and time is spent perfecting set plays, but the most critical play of the season could not have been more unstructured and instinctive.

Thurston and then Michael Morgan showed great composure to create an opportunity for one the great finishes to a game.

Morgan's one-handed game saver to Feldt set up the most memorable try in NRL grand final history . . . at least since Benji to Patty Richards, anyway!

That presented Thurston's first opportunity — a kick from the sideline that could not have come

closer to winning it — another 2cm of bend and it was in! Also, I know it was a massive moment, but the time Thurston took to kick that goal was outrageous . . . surely a shot clock is needed in these situations.

The next opportunity came in the opening set of golden point following that fundamental error from Ben Hunt.

You can't blame Hunt in this situation. Surely Brisbane's game plan would have detailed that Feldt has one of the most difficult kick-offs to defuse in the competition. I often wonder why teams put halfbacks or hookers under these kicks — that should be the job of the fullback!

Following the error the Cowboys followed footy logic to set up a field goal attempt from the scrum.

While the winning field goal will

SECOND TIME'S A CHARM

Johnathan Thurston might have missed with his first chance to deliver North Queensland a title . . . but he was never going to miss with his second.

be spoken about forever, the critical play was the composure of Thurston and Lachlan Coote. Instead of having a shot under extreme pressure they both took their time to create an opportunity for a cleaner shot. When it came, there was no way Thurston was ever going to miss it.

The Cowboys' composure under pressure was a trait throughout the season.

From the crunch game against the Storm in round four when they were 0-3 to start the year — and down and out against Melbourne — they showed they could hang in right to end of games.

They trailed at half-time 13 times this year . . . and came back to win seven of them, including the big one.

They practised for this grand final win every time that situation occurred. Being in this pressured situation helped them to keep their composure when it mattered most.

There was a period in that second half when it looked like the Cowboys had lost the confidence to play through the Broncos' incredible defence. It's far from a dominating defence, but Brisbane have an incredible ability to make key tackles when needed and hold their line together to force the opposition to get frustrated. The Cows were on the brink, but they kept calm when it mattered most. Clutch!

COWBOY REPEAT?

WITH THE SAME ROSTER NEXT year, can the Cowboys repeat this phenomenal season? Do they have the same drive and ambition to back it up?

History shows premiership-winning teams can get close the following year, but no-one in the salary cap era has been able to repeat. Well, the Cowboys will give themselves every chance.

They have great leadership from the board and head coach, a great roster and the best clutch player in NRL history. Thurston comes up with plays when needed!

The key to this year's form was the inclusion of Coote and Jake Granville. These guys still have improvement in them after their best NRL seasons. Granville solved the dummy-half problem of the post-Payne years, while Coote was a great second playmaker/organisier/kicker to Thurston.

Morgan showed his quality and the Cows could expand his responsibility next season. His best running is on the left side of the field, but he played almost exclusively on the right at the back-end of the season, with Coote on the left and Thurston everywhere.

A few more tweaks and inventive coaching, and they'll go close again in 2016. **RLW**

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'I have challenged Johnathan, I've asked him to look at different things and he's had an open mind to all of it'

Before Paul Green could consider winning North Queensland's first title he had to win over the Cowboys' No.1 gun **BY GREG PRICHARD**

PAUL GREEN AND Johnathan Thurston barely knew each other when Green took over as Cowboys coach . . . but one thing Green *did* know was that to be successful he had to get Thurston to buy into his plans for the team. Here's how he did it.

"Obviously I'd watched Johnathan play, but I hardly knew him," Green tells *RLW* in the victorious Cowboys dressing room after the grand final against the Broncos.

"I think your relationship with your players evolves as your team progresses and I got to know JT better and he got to know me better. We developed a mutual respect and trust and our relationship blossomed from that.

"I include the senior players like Johnathan in most decisions that I make, if not all of them, and I think that's the key to establishing a good relationship with a player like him.

"He's our halfback and main playmaker, so I've got to have a good relationship with him – the same as I need to with all of our leaders."

Green says he convinced Thurston to look at a few different ways of doing things in order to maximise the Cowboys' chances of rising from a regular top-eight side to becoming consistent premiership contenders.



"I'm not going to teach Johnathan Thurston how to play," Green says. "It's about moulding how we play around the strengths of the players that we have.

"But I've challenged him, I've asked him to look at different things and he's had an open mind to all of it, which I'm really pleased about. He has worked hard at supporting what I wanted to do with the team and his role in that.

"Players – especially your main players – have to believe in what you're trying to do. If they don't, it's not going to work. I've never doubted JT believed in it.

"I'm really lucky the leadership group I have here has come on-board with everything I wanted to do.

"Coaching is about getting the best out of your players, but it's not a one-size-fits-all approach. It's about playing a style of game that suits the different skills of your players."

Green developed his own coaching beliefs and also borrowed from Broncos coach Wayne Bennett, whose run of seven straight grand final wins has now come to an end.

Green played his last few games under Bennett at the Broncos in 2004 and also began his coaching career under him.

Asked if he and Bennett were friends these days, Green replies: "Oh yeah, I think we are. We go back a long way. We don't invite

each other over for dinner every week or anything like that, but I'd consider Wayne a friend. Wayne's been good to me. Now we're both head coaches and Wayne's one of my competitors, but there's still that friendship there, I'm sure.

"I was going to say we've got a mutual respect for each other, but it goes a lot further than that. I mean, my respect for Wayne is huge." **RLW**

COWBOY ODD COUPLE

OLD POP AND THE SURFER DUDE.

They sound like the odd couple, and Cowboys fullback Lachlan Coote and hooker Jake Granville probably are. But the bond they have formed as roomies in 2015 has paid the ultimate dividend.

The duo formed a lethal combination that helped lead the Cowboys to a maiden title, but Coote (*right*) reveals they also have an unbreakable bond off the field . . . and an unusual pre-bedtime ritual.



"Granville is the best bloke I have ever met . . . just so laidback and easy to get along with," Coote says. "He's like a typical surfer dude. He kicks back and nothing worries him. He's the best roomie. He makes me tea every night before I go to bed and gets the cookies ready for me.

"It was a bit awkward when we roomed together for the first time when we had a trial against Brisbane in Mackay.

"At first I didn't really know the bloke, but

I know everything about him now and he is a champion."

Granville is so chilled you wonder whether he might slip into a coma at any time. But *RLW* managed to get him to open up about why he likes to get his good mate a cuppa and cookies each night.

"Yeah, I make Lachlan tea every night. He's a bit of an old man. 'Old Pop' we call him," Granville grins. "He has a few blow-ups every now and then . . . so I try and calm him down. But it's good to be his roomie because he looks after me, too.

"He's an unbelievable mate of mine and I'm so appreciative of him. It's a dream come true to win a premiership with him."

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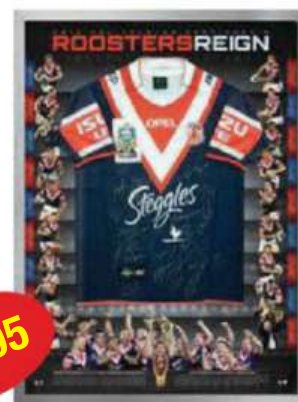


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Pride of the north... and more than a few southerners

RLW's MATT CLEARY spent grand final night with the Southern Stampede – a group of Cowboys supporters who live south of the border – and don't you reckon they had a good time!

SOME YEARS AGO I SPENT a couple of days with Matt Bowen and his family on their property in Hope Vale, far north Queensland. Hope Vale would be an hour north of Cooktown which itself is four hours north of Cairns. Cooktown is like the frontier of Australia and Hope Vale is three river crossings and a heap of crocodiles north of that. And it's something of another world.

Because like most Australians, if I want dinner I head to Coles and pick up a lump of Porterhouse and baby potatoes you can microwave in the plastic. If the Bowens want a feed they head out on their speedboat and hunt dugong and turtle and great thumping manta-rays with spears. They kill pigs and goanna and wallaby. They breed Brahman bulls. And they kill them, cook them and eat them. For a white-arsed kid from Canberra it could have been Jurassic Park.

Another thing the Bowens did that was interesting for the Southerner was that every two weeks whenever

their preternaturally gifted son and brother Matthew played fullback for the North Queensland Cowboys – a magnificent career which ran 270 first-grade games from 2001-13 – the family would pile into utes and people-movers and drive nine hours to Townsville for the game. And then they'd drive nine hours back.

Now, while our fresh and popular new premiers' home support has never been in doubt – for FNQ, like PNG, is a land of rugby league – it is rather a long way away for supporters to travel if your nearest neighbour in the derby game is 1500 kilometres south.

Fortuitously, across the Time of Bowen, the Cowboys became everyone's second-favourite team. Their rugby league was audacious and hot-footed and just plain fun. And people flocked to see them. And Cowboys' suits were smart enough to realise they needed to covet and convert this fan base. And thus was born The Southern Stampede, the Cowboys fans who support them from southern climes.

The club holds functions in Sydney and elsewhere where fans can meet the players and talk about the team. A bunch of them went to the Dally M Awards even though their team did not. One who attended is 22-year-old Blake Freeburn of the NSW Central Coast. Blake latched onto the Cows as a kid after his old man, Mick, a Manly fan, become disillusioned with the club's treatment of the North Sydney Bears, their 'partner' in that ill-fated joint venture.

Stuff that political bullshit,



thought Mick. And the Cows won a family.

We're with Blake and his little sister, Leksi, 10 and two-and-a-half-year-old son Nash. Blake's impressive with his dexterity. He hands out lollies, water, and changes his young fella's nappy, standing up. When I was 22 at the footy I could barely pull on my own pants. And you feel sort of proud of him, if that makes sense. Blake would see every game in Sydney, Newcastle, Canberra and Wollongong. He's been to Brisbane where he saw the other greatest game he's ever



KINGS OF THE SOUTH:

Blake Freeburn (left) might live on the NSW Central Coast, but he's a huge Cowboys fan, just like his son Nash and sister Leksi; the trio were three of thousands of Southern Stampede members who flocked to ANZ Stadium to cheer on their side last Sunday.

seen, this year's qualifying final between the eventual grand finalists. He's actually never seen a game in Townsville but that will change next year when he aims to get about to everything he can. He once sat at a game at Brookvale Oval and wondered who the bloke sitting next to him was. It was Cowboys CEO Greg Tonner.

And so we look around at this mighty coliseum and wonder should there be a grand final in Brisbane. And you could make a good case yes and no. Cracking stadium, Suncorp, but it's hard to top an extra 30,000 voices. But whatever, it's an argument that 'people' won't have a say in. It's big end of town, political. Money will drive it. It's the same reason the grand final isn't on at 3pm when 80 per cent of league fans would prefer it. David Gyngell's argument that Nine needs a return on their billion-dollar bounty is the strongest one.

And here we are... with Blake and his people on a fine and warm Sunday evening halfway up Aisle 117 straight behind the posts where Cold Chisel has just ripped off their classic four-song set. Blake secured tickets in a 'better' part of the stadium but wanted to be with the fans, amongst the noise, amongst his people. So he swapped them. Plenty of Cowboys people did the same thing.

Though it's probably 60/40 Broncos fans, the Cowboys ones would be noisier and more colourful. There are men who actually look like cowboys in giant ten gallon hats, RM Williams boots and jeans that have worked with animals. There are



huge novelty Cowboys hats (Blake is wearing one but takes it off lest it impede the Broncos supporters behind us) and men in long white socks like '70s golfers.

And so Cold Chisel rip off their timeless Aussie pub rock anthems just in front of us as one of the Broncos blokes behind me spills his schooner on the small of my back. He couldn't be more apologetic. Indeed he's mortified. I crack a joke. He laughs. It's a balmy evening on grand final night. Let's enjoy it. And you think again how great it is to be a sports-loving citizen of this funny old big lug of a country.

And out come the Cowboys in their traditional navy blue, lemon yellow and white strip, their logo of bull horns atop a star. Blake rips off a tremendous whistle, two fingers in his mouth, several octaves up and down. Top whistling. It'll be a feature of his work all night. The fans wave a thousand flags. Kyle Feldt kicks off, a huge abomination from space. And

away we go. And it is Cow Heaven.

And again you're very pleased to be Australian, to share this . . . stuff.

Top stuff, Country.

The game? Well, you saw it. How about it? Suffice to say that from the northern end where our Southern Stampede supporter group sits there is 80 minutes of noise and angst and tears and ecstasy. When Thurston hits the post with the potential match-winner they're all up and down and exclaiming, head in hands, as fans are across the country. Ben Hunt drops the kick-off to golden-point extra-time and Blake and his mates dare to dream. When their champion, Johnathan Thurston, wins the game and the Clive Churchill Medal by shooting his field goal directly at us, it's a booming result of solid gold bullion that displeases literally nobody in Australia. That's the power of the man and the power of these North Queensland Cowboys. More power to them. RLW

Mad Dog's mad dash

WAYNE 'MAD DOG' EVANS DROVE MORE THAN

2000km to watch the Cowboys in last Sunday's grand final . . . but still reckons the 100m sprint back from the bathroom was the longest trip of his life.

Extra time had just kicked off but Mad Dog, the fanatical Cowboys supporter famed for wearing a dog collar to games, was not in his seat.

After knocking back his share of XXXX and Bundy rum throughout the day, the Cowboys' No.1 fan had to relieve himself. Then he heard the crowd roar as Ben Hunt grassed Kyle Feldt's spiralling kick-off.

Showing speed that would attract attention from any greyhound trainer worth his salt, Mad Dog bolted from the bathroom and made it to his seat just as the scrum packed.

"Everyone was in the shit house running around stupid," he grins.

"I knew I just needed to get to my seat, it was the longest run of my life, brother."

Watching Mad Dog (*below, with wife Leonie*) during extra time was fascinating stuff. The bloke went through about 200 different emotions in two minutes. From sheer excitement every time

Johnathan Thurston handled the ball, to despair when Kane Linnett was tackled out of field goal range midway through the set.

When Thurston eventually potted the match-winner, everyone in Bay 119 leapt up. Except Mad Dog. He just sat there stunned, his eyes glazed. Then suddenly it hit him, and he started hugging anybody he could get his tattooed arms around.

"I've been supporting this side for 20 years," he chokes, tears welling in his eyes.

"I was here in 2005 and I walked away with the shits, I'm walking away with a smile today, brother.

"They've just paid me in full. . . I love 'em.

"One point, 20 points, 40 points it doesn't matter – as long as you're there in the end."

In July, Mad Dog told *RLW* that when the Cows won their first premiership he'd like to get the players' signatures tattooed on his back. Down in the dressing rooms, grand final hero Feldt says he'd be more than happy to oblige.

"I'd definitely like to help him do that," Feldt says.

"He's a good bloke, Mad Dog. I haven't run into him in a while, but hopefully I'll see him soon."

STEVEN RUSSO



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Cheer up, Brisbane – the best is yet to come

They're hurting now, but Benny's triumphant return gives Broncos great hope for the future **BY TONY DURKIN**

ALTHOUGH BITTERLY disappointed his grandson didn't make the Broncos' final 17 for grand final day, founding chairman Barry Maranta still says the \$100,000 spent to have Wayne Bennett released from his Canberra contract back in 1987 was worth every single cent.

And despite the Broncos' 17-16 loss, Maranta predicts a 'sensational' future for the Broncos because on his return to the club after a six-year sabbatical, he can see that Bennett is following the script he was handed by the foundation board 28 years ago.

"When we signed Wayne as our inaugural coach we told him he had five years to build success – and by success we meant a premiership," says Maranta who was not at the ground to witness a Broncos grand final appearance for the first time last Sunday night.

"Too many clubs fall into the trap of buying players in a bid to find instant success, but at the Broncos Wayne has a proven track record of building a team that can maintain success.

"As a board and as financial backers of the Broncos back then, that was our advice to him from the start. His beliefs mirrored ours and everyone bought into that strategy.

"Now, Wayne has come back and started that building process again and I think the future of the Broncos is sensational."

The undiluted praise by Maranta for the Broncos coach came despite a heavy heart. His grandson Lachlan missed selection on the big day despite making 20 appearances during the season and being the club's leading try scorer. Those 15 tries included a hat-trick in round 19 and a candidate for try of the year against the Raiders in round 12.

"As a family we were very disappointed for him," the former Broncos chairman admits.

"But it's a team game and the job

of the coach is to select the players he thinks will get the job done. It is what it is."

However, when quizzed on whether paying the \$100,000 release fee for Bennett to join the Broncos from Canberra, Maranta was far more verbose.

"I remember Paul Morgan (the late co-founding director) phoned me from Canberra and told me he had good and bad news," Maranta recalls.

"He said the good news was that we had secured Wayne as coach; the bad news was that it had cost us \$100,000. I was dumbfounded, because our budget was \$30,000.

"But Paul's theory at the time

proved to be correct. If Wayne was to stay for five years – which was our plan – that was only an additional \$20,000 a year. His initial stint was 20 years, so that money was certainly well spent."

Maranta and his fellow directors had each played in the Brisbane competition and were well aware of Bennett's coaching ability. However they had focused most their attention on the quartet of Bob McCarthy, John Lang, Ross Strudwick and Allan Fitzgibbon as their foundation coach until coaching guru, Jack Gibson, entered the picture.

Fellow director Steve Williams – Maranta's son-in-law – had been on a tour to the Super Bowl in 1978 that had been led by Gibson and his lieutenant Ron Massey, and took advantage of that relationship to seek guidance from 'The Supercoach'.

He left them in no doubt that Bennett was their man.

But when the Broncos directors reminded Gibson that Bennett was already under contract and coaching at Canberra, Gibson dryly told them, 'Just go get him'.

They did, and he stayed 20 years, won six premierships and created a dynasty that lapsed somewhat during his six-year sabbatical with the Dragons and then the Knights.

But, as last Sunday night's gripping contest proved, the boss is definitely back. And, at 65 and coaching players almost young enough to be his grandchildren, he doesn't look like leaving again any time soon. **RLW**



HE'S STILL GOT IT

Wayne Bennett did a fantastic job in his first season back at Brisbane, which was no surprise to the men who originally lured him to the club – Broncos founders (from left) Barry Maranta, Steve Williams and Gary Balkin.

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BOY OH COWBOY!

As North Queensland bask in the glory of a maiden premiership win over the Broncos, *RLW* counts down the 10 greatest moments in their history

10

1993: The sleeping giant awakes

TOWNSVILLE LIES IN THE afternoon shadow of Mt Stuart.

Imaginative locals say if you look close enough its outline forms the “sleeping giant” – a man with a paunch belly laying on his back. The sleeping giant is an apt analogy for the North Queensland Cowboys’ bid to be a competitive force in the Winfield Cup in 1995.

To outsiders they have appeared sleepy in their approach, compared to headline grabbers like the Western Reds and the Auckland Warriors. Until last week, the public perception of the Cowboys was of far northern country hicks whose only real identity was former Test winger Kerry Boustead . . . the local boy come good who mortgaged his house, and gave up a small Sydney business to gamble on a dream. For two years the NQ Cowboys were little more than a tiny rented office in the Price Waterhouse building in Townsville’s city centre, Bowie’s mobile phone and car, a little guy known as ‘Shorty’ McLean and a whole lot of hope for perhaps the staunchest league area in Australia.

Local sports writer Doug Kingston “beat up” a story about North Queensland bidding to become a Winfield Cup side after the Parramatta-Brisbane Panasonic Cup match in May, 1989, which drew 16,000. He’d asked visiting ARL chairman Ken Arthurson about whether the region should attempt to enter the big league. Arko is not one to stunt enthusiasm for the game. He said it was a good idea, and worth a try.

Kingston walked into the managing director’s office at NQ Newspapers and told the boss that unless someone in the town picked up the political football and ran with it, the idea would die a very rapid death. Ron McLean got behind the idea with his own cash, and with the significant weight of his newspapers and his influence on



local and statewide business. They convinced Boustead and gave him a two-year contract to live by his mobile phone in the hope that, at the end of it, he’d still have a job. He’s just signed for another two years.

Last Friday night came the first tangible evidence that the Cowboys were not an illusion. They trooped out the dancing girls, the barramundi, their first official signing Dean Schifilliti (above, right, with Boustead) and league legend John Raper to show the Cowboys were no longer in slumber.

Watching on were league supremos John Quayle and Arthurson, QRL representatives who had poo-pooed the Cowboys six months earlier, PNG officials who see them as the big hope

of providing some stars, government officials and 240 locals.

Castlemaine Perkins, who had already pumped \$250,000 into the Cowboys, formalised their major sponsorship by announcing a five-year deal with a five-year option under the XXXX banner.

Queensland Minister for Sport Bob Gibbs promised funding for the disused Willows Paceway, which will be converted into a 20,000-capacity multi-purpose stadium. McLean then stunned the audience by handing over to the league the new club’s required \$500,000 bond – five months ahead of deadline.

They are unashamedly country. McLean, Boustead and coach Grant

Bell are unpretentious good guys. Even first ‘public’ signing Schifilliti is the son of a cane cutter from nearby Ingham. Don’t think that means they are backward.

“The big attraction,” said Innisfail-born Boustead, “is that we can offer an alternative to players right throughout Queensland country, a chance to play in the best competition but not have to go to the city. Before, all the great footballers from this region had to leave town. We have a strong nursery here and a population of 200,000 within an hour’s drive. But we’ll be scouting everywhere, including Darwin and Papua New Guinea.”

— NEIL CADIGAN
RLW October Special, 1993

9 2003: Bowen burns Bunnies

SORRY IF THIS IS getting boring, but salute rugby league's new king of fullbacks, Matty Bowen.

That's not to be ungracious to the likes of Lockyer, Wesser, Schifcofske and the rest of our custodians but this young kid from Hopevale is all class, and he proved it yet again against the hapless Rabbitohs.

The script writers couldn't have written this. No one could have foreseen that, as good as he is, the 20-year-old they call 'B1' (cousin Brenton doubles as 'B2') would use the Cowboys' last home match of the season as a personal stage to set alight the venue and bring 13,872 spectators to their feet time and again.

Apart from his personal tally of three tries, he laid on several more, including the first of the night when he shot a bullet of a pass 20 metres, to find Matt Sing on the touchline. It was curtain-up for the 'Matty Bowen Show'.

But the supporting cast cannot be forgotten on a night when records tumbled. Centre Josh Hannay set two of them – the Cowboys' most points and most goals in one match. Hannay had already set the tally of most points in a season and most points for the club overall. The 60-8 thrashing was also North Queensland's biggest win since

their inception, surpassing a 50-4 thrashing of the Dragons in 2000.

To be fair to Souths, they did have some excuses. Seven of their top players were unavailable through injury and the toll worsened during the game when another four were sidelined. They played the last 25 minutes with only 13 men but even so, they were hopeless.

Coach Paul Langmack rated the loss as the lowest moment of his career.

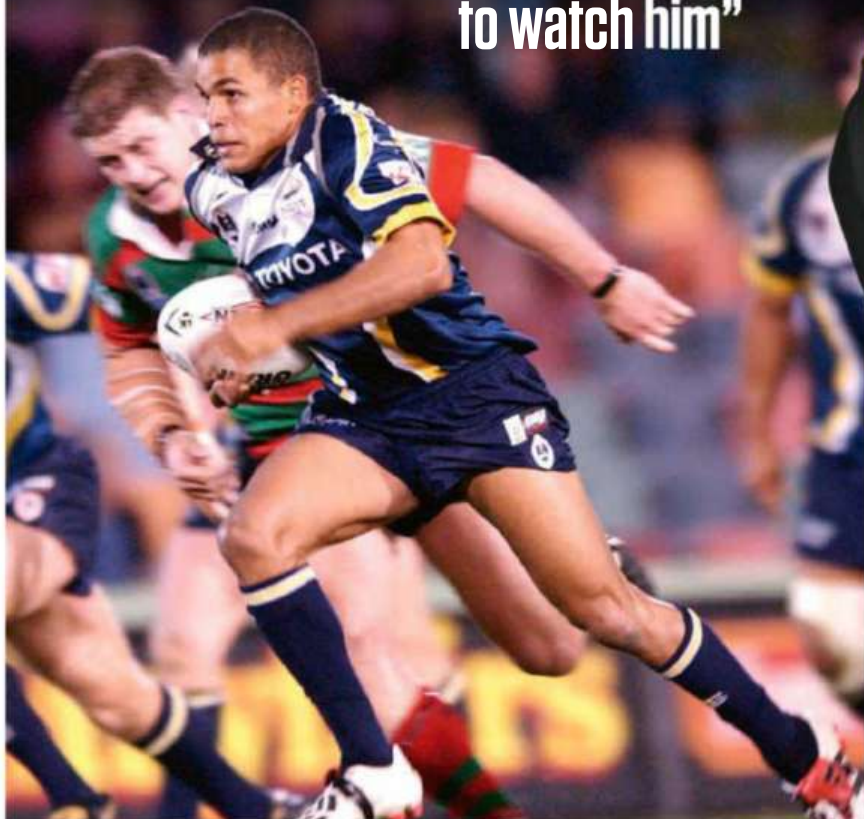
Cowboys coach Graham Murray lauded all his players and agreed that Bowen, Sing and Ty Williams were just about the best back-three combination in the NRL.

Of Bowen he said: "I just like watching him play. A couple of his runs tonight were just outstanding. It's a pleasure to be in the audience to watch him."

Some weeks ago, *RLW* suggested that if the Queensland selectors had an ounce of imagination and courage, they'd pick Bowen for State of Origin. They took our advice. Now, the same goes for our Kangaroo selectors because, as we said before, he really is that good.

— JOHN CAMPLIN,
RLW, Aug 27, 2003

"I just like watching him play. It's a pleasure to be in the audience to watch him"



8

2005: The saviour arrives

THERE IS ALWAYS AN AIR OF anticipation and excitement when clubs unveil their big-name off-season purchases – it tends to put extra bounce in everyone's stride, from the chief executive right down to the ball boys and the bloke selling ice creams on the hill.

Clubs can often live or die by their signings and it goes without saying that the pressure put on the star recruits will be immense when the new NRL season kicks off in March.

Fitting into an established team is like your first day of high school; sure, you know the odd bloke here and there but the majority of stares you get are either blank or forced.

"Who does he think he is waltzing in here on the big bucks, trying to get my spot?" would be the main thought running through the head of the strangers in the dressing room as you're introduced.

But very much like that first day of high school, it doesn't take long until you're considered one of the gang.

Of all the comings and goings for the 2005 season, I have focused on seven blokes who will be well and truly up to their armpits in nerves and excitement as they start that next journey of their footballing lives. These are the guys I think will fight it out to be the best buys of the year. Shannon Hegarty (Rabbitohs), Ben Kennedy (Sea Eagles), Steve Price (Warriors), Kirk Reynoldson (Knights), Amos Roberts (Roosters), Mark Riddell (Eels) and Johnathan Thurston (Cowboys).



JOHNATHAN THURSTON

PROS: Has been regarded by many as perhaps the most under-rated backline player in the comp, and I would have to agree. He's been unfortunate to have Anasta and Sherwin in front of him at Belmore but he seems to have an unwavering coolness about his play that is really infectious.

CONS: His lack of size will continue to hamper his progression into the elite status unless he has an off-season living in the gym. He also must curb his desires when it comes to throwing that dodgy pass or kicking when no-one knows he's doing it.

VERDICT: You can tell a lot about a bloke by his actions, and any man who would offer his grand final winner's ring to his injured captain would be welcome at my club any day of the year.

— MARK GEYER
RLW, 2005 Preview

7

1998: Back from the dead

TIM SHEENS IS BANKING on the Cowboys' amazing comeback win over Penrith last Friday becoming a significant turning point in their season.

"Without getting carried away . . . the confidence we take into our next five or six games will be a big plus," Cowboys coach Sheens said.

Indeed, no team will feel safe against the Cowboys until the final siren, having watched them stage the most amazing recovery in premiership history. Penrith enjoyed a standing ovation when they went into half-time leading 26-0 after a five-try blitz.

Less than an hour later, the Panthers were being booed off the paddock, their heads bowed in a state of shock – like everyone in the crowd of 8685 – at what had transpired. Penrith added just two points in the second half as the Cowboys piled on seven tries.

"A very strange game," offered an incredulous Sheens (*right*).

His old mate Royce Simmons winced as he reflected on his team's Jekyll and Hyde performance. The Panthers

could do no wrong in the opening half. They completed 19 of their 23 attacking sets and missed only four tackles. In the second half they completed just three sets with the football and missed 25 tackles.

The last time Simmons had seen a Penrith team booed off by their own fans was as a player in the early 1980s . . . and he wasn't finding it any easier to cop last Friday.

"A very, very weak second half," he offered. "We turned the tap off at half-time and once you do that it's very hard to turn back on."

Noa Nadruku and five-eighth Andrew Dunemann were architects of the dazzling recovery. Nadruku bombed a simple chance in the opening minutes, but turned his night around with a second-half hat-trick.

– **DAVID PAGE, RLW, June 3, 1998**



"The Cowboys staged the most amazing recovery in premiership history"



5

2004: First finals win

NOT EVEN A PUNCH FLUSH ON THE jaw from the biggest fist in rugby league could wipe the smile from David Myles' face in an ecstatic Cowboys dressing room after last Saturday night's stunning upset over the Bulldogs.

Myles found himself on the wrong end of a straight right from Blues Origin enforcer Willie Mason midway through a classic finals encounter and although he lost the fight and conceded the penalty, he could see the positives.

"He got me all right but did you see all the Cowboys run in to square up?" Myles said with a sly grin. "That shows the great camaraderie in the club – everyone sticks up for one another and believes in one another and that's what has gotten us this far."

Given little hope by anyone south of the Fitzroy River before the game, the Cowboys played with amazing confidence and poise in their first finals encounter to outlast the team regarded as the NRL's September specialists.

"Everyone wrote us off but we had self-belief and it is very exciting times for the Cowboys," winning coach Graham Murray said. "We are alive for another week and will have gained plenty out of this win."

The Bulldogs were supposed to blow the Cowboys off the park early but the reverse happened, with the visitors charging to a 16-0 lead in less than half an hour.

Canterbury – as they invariably do – made a fight of it, coming back to trail by just four points in the dying stages.

But this was the Cowboys' night and when Matt Sing produced a superb

6

1995: You never forget your first!

SOMETIME THIS WEEK

North Queensland coach Grant Bell will sit down with Kerry Boustead and crack open a bottle of Moet.

The former Cowboys chief executive bought his close mate the bottle when he was appointed coach and the two promised to drink it after the side's first win in the Winfield Cup.

It may have taken eight rounds – and Boustead (*right*) has since resigned from his position – but the two will fulfil their vow after the

Cowboys downed Illawarra 14-10 in Wollongong last Sunday.

"The champagne is not quite vintage yet, but it was starting to get there," quipped a somewhat relieved Bell.

The victory has been a long time coming for the Cowboys but was well deserved and well celebrated.

While the atmosphere in the dressing room was rather subdued, a few players hoped the bus and plane were well stocked (with drinks) for the trip back north.

The win will do wonders for the club's morale, with Bell admitting the pressure of producing their first win was starting to mount.

"There have been those saying that we wouldn't win a game. After seven straight losses the pressure on

everyone, particularly on the players, was starting to add up," said Bell.

"But we've been chipping away for few weeks and this is a big hurdle to get over. I think we can prove we are more than just nuisance value."

While the Cowboys turned in one of their best performances, the Steelers produced probably their worst game in years. While some excuse could be made for the fact they were without five regular first-graders and the loss of Test winger Rod Wishart early against the Cowboys, it was hard to explain away an incompetent display.

"We've been flat for a month and if we continue to play the same way we are no chance for the top eight," lamented halfback John Simon, himself horribly out of form.

"There isn't much talk on the field and that's something that will have to change."

Coach Allan Fitzgibbon was naturally disappointed with his side's performance and was at a loss to explain the inept display.

"We trained well all week and the players were looking forward to the game," volunteered Fitzgibbon.

"But right from the start we struggled and it went downhill from there."

"To sum it up – it was a disaster."

"Our ball control was non-existent and some of the mistakes we made early in the tackle count were unbelievable. I lost count of how many times we gave them the football."

– **MATTHEW GUNN, RLW, May 3, 1995**

high leap to mark a bomb with three minutes left on the clock, a famous 30-22 victory was assured.

"We didn't just come down here to make up the numbers, even if that's what most people thought would happen," Cowboys skipper Travis Norton said. "We want to play semi-final football and knew we would have to lift to survive. We got those early points and then our defence was great to hold them out when it mattered."

The Cowboys had heroes right across the field, with their back three – fullback Matt Bowen and wingers Ty Williams and Sing – in sensational attacking form.

As well as scoring three tries, Sing saved another two with last-ditch defence on his opposite Matt Utai, to strengthen his claims for a return to the Australian squad for the Tri-Nations.

Halfback Nathan Fien had arguably his best game in the blue and yellow while hookers Aaron Payne and Leigh McWilliams tormented the Bulldogs' fragile defence around the rucks.

– TONY ADAMS, RLW, Sept 15, 2004

"We didn't come here to make up the numbers, even if that's what most people thought would happen"



4

2015: Back to the GF!

YOU CAN ACTUALLY PINPOINT THE exact moment Johnathan Thurston realised the Cowboys had made the grand final. The clock read 68:28 on the Channel 9 widget.

After putting back-rower Gavin Cooper in for the match-winner with

some of his trademark Thurston trickery, the North Queensland halfback threw his fist into the air as if to bump knuckles with the football gods themselves.

After all the dud calls, the heartbreak and all the conspiracy theories, the Cowboys were into the big dance after a 10-year absence.



Not surprisingly Thurston was a central figure in the 32-12 win, setting up four of the Cowboys' six tries.

He wasn't the only star though. Praise must be heaped on Ben Hannant, the unwanted Bronco who laid on a decisive try for Michael Morgan with a charge-down on a Cooper Cronk kick.

Cooper too, who swung the game in the Cowboys' favour just before halftime when he took advantage of Matt Duffie's feeble attempt to defuse a Thurston kick close to the Storm line. The Cowboys were ahead 16-12 at the break and from that point on they were in complete control, strangling the usually resilient Melbourne out of the game during the second half.

"We were consistent with our effort for the whole game," Paul Green said. "We controlled the game well as soon as we got the lead... which probably at times through the year wasn't our strength, but we've certainly learned to do that for the month or so."

– STEVEN RUSSO

3

2004: Bucking the Broncos

AND YOU THOUGHT THE crocs and stingers up here were deadly!

North Queenslanders have this week added a new name to their long list of dangerous predators as the mighty Cowboys continue their incredible, and somewhat bloody, assault on a shell-shocked NRL.

Once the whipping boys of the league, the men in the big hats are now just one win away from the grand final after scoring an emphatic win against long-time rivals Brisbane – their first win against 'big brother' in 17 attempts.

"People are always saying how Brisbane is our big brother," trumpeted avid Cowboys fan Paul 'Sheriff' Riddett.

"Well, that's the thing about big brothers, eventually you grow up and belt the shit out of them."

Townsville is a delightful little place for the danger-loving Steve Irwin types of this world. An article in the *Townsville Bulletin* on the morning of the game warned visitors to avoid swimming in the creeks as the reason it's shark-free is because the crocs have eaten them out.

And then there's the small matter of those nasty box jellyfish. The ones you're warned about in hotel welcoming guides and on giant red signs along the beach.

If one of these blokes gets his nematocysts into you... it'll hurt so bad your friends won't be able to hold you down. The pain will cause your lungs and

heart to stop working. You will die screaming.

Playing the Cowboys now has similar consequences.

Led by two of the most dangerous creatures in the league, barnstorming prop Paul Rauhihi and livewire fullback Matt Bowen, the Cowboys killed off Brisbane's season and at the same time added another chapter to their own fairytale story.

And they did it with defence. The type of crash, bang, wallop that would make the bull riders and croc catchers of this area damn proud.

The night was a sad one for retiring Brisbane captain Gordon Tallis, the Townsville-born back-rower who grew

to become one of the game's most feared and respected players.

Struck down by a bug on the morning of the game, Tallis started the match from the bench and finished it on the same plastic seats – watching from the sideline as the hooter sounded and a jam-packed Dairy Farmers Stadium broke into chaos.

As the Queensland hero left the field, the crowd stopped celebrating momentarily to proudly clap the local boy from the field. Cheering for the warrior who had started and finished his league career in their town.

They simply love their predators up here.

– NICK WALSHAW, RLW, Sept 22, 2004



2

2005: First time to the big dance

WIN OR LOSE THIS SUNDAY, Johnathan Thurston has declared 2005 will be more satisfying than last year's premiership triumph with the Bulldogs.

In a remarkable admission on the eve of the grand final, Thurston says he'll take more out of this season than last – even though he lifted the NRL trophy in 2004.

"It's more satisfying," says Thurston, who engineered North Queensland's stunning 29-0 win over minor premiers Parramatta last Sunday.

"Some will say it can't get more satisfying than winning a grand final – that's what you play footy for.

"But this year has just been more satisfying. I had a broken leg last year, so I didn't play many games, while I've played a big role in this team this year."

After playing only six games leading up to the grand final last year, Thurston (right) was drafted into the Bulldogs' squad for the decider after skipper Steve Price was ruled out with a knee injury, coming off the bench to help his side to victory.

In an extraordinary gesture, Thurston actually gave his premiership ring to the vanquished captain but was given another by his coach soon after.

"As soon as I got the ring I gave it

to Pricey," Thurston says. "After we did the lap of honour, Pricey gave me another one – Steve Folkes gave his to me."

In contrast, the 22-year-old has been a mainstay in the Cowboys' charge this year, securing his reputation as one of the best halves in the game by clinching the Queensland No.7 spot and the Dally M Medal.

Should Thurston secure his second premiership ring this Sunday, he will become the first player to score back-to-back titles with different clubs since Johnny Mayes won with Manly and Easts in 1973-74.

"It's a little surreal," Thurston says. "Grand finals don't come around very often, so to be in two in a row – it's pretty big.

"We've bought ourselves a ticket for it. Now we've just got to win it."

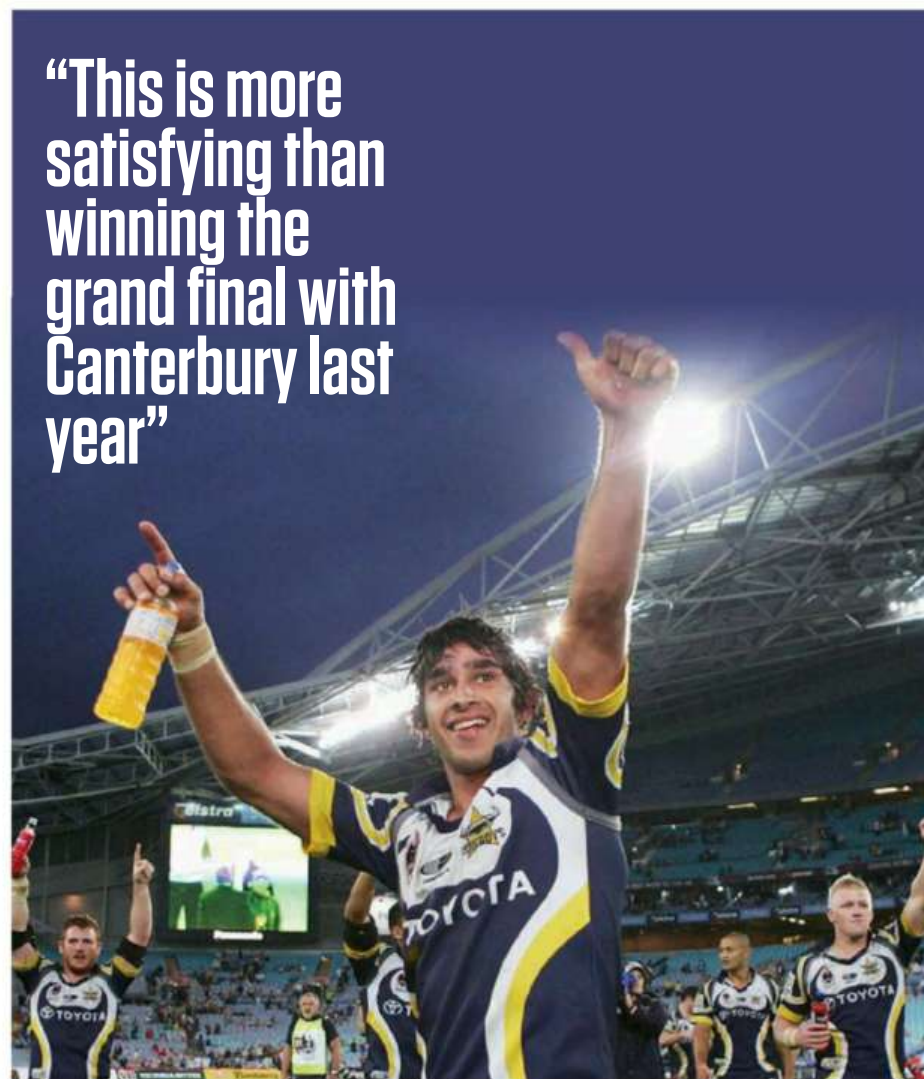
Thurston isn't the only Cowboy to be playing in a second grand final for a different club. Skipper Travis Norton goes into the clash with the Tigers having played for the Bulldogs in the '98 decider, while winger Matt Sing was part of the Roosters' unsuccessful tilt in 2000 against Brisbane.

"It's another opportunity in a different jumper," Sing says. "I've been there before, but I've got a great feeling about this one.

"I just don't want to let it slip – it might never happen again."

– GLENN JACKSON
RLW, Sept 28, 2005

"This is more satisfying than winning the grand final with Canterbury last year"

**1 2015: Thank God they have finally done it!**

THE MAN UPSTAIRS MUST BE A COWBOYS FAN. HOW else can you explain *that* ending?

Down 16-12 late in the second half, the Cowboys looked shot. The 'Wall that Wayne Built' had prevented Paul Green's men from converting a mountain of field position into points during the second stanza. But John Asiata, the deeply religious Cowboys benchman, kept the faith.

"We were down but I prayed for it," Asiata tells RLW.

"It was tough out there and I was out on my feet, but I knew we could do it and I kept praying during that last 30 seconds."

Then with 15 seconds remaining, the miracle that Asiata – and everyone from Bundaberg to Cape York – had been praying for was answered.

Last tackle, a bad ball from dummy-half Jake Granville causes Johnathan Thurston to stumble, but he still manages to shrug off Adam Blair and Andrew McCullough before floating a ball to Michael Morgan. We'll let Asiata take it from here . . .

"Then 'Morgs' went down that side and passed it for 'Feldty' to score in the corner and it's 16-all" he says.

"I knew it was going to happen, it was just our time to shine."

Thurston's after-the-siren conversion attempt cannoned off the upright – clearly the Almighty didn't want to make it too obvious that he was playing favourites. But with two minutes gone in golden point he showed his true colours by guiding Thurston's field goal right over the black dot.

"I think this was a plan God had," Asiata smiles.

"He's helped us out this whole season."

– STEVEN RUSSO



MAD MONDAY!

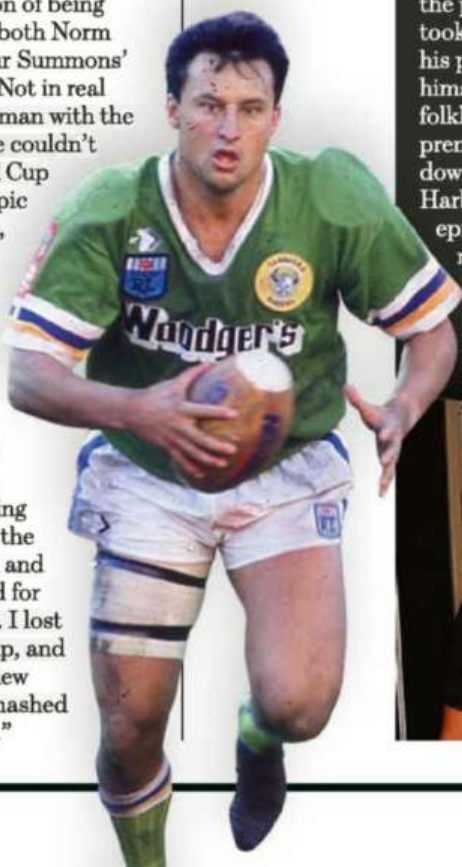
It's a funny old game, rugby league. And *RLW* wants to celebrate all the characters and colour that make it great

CELEBRATING TO EXCESS!

Winning a grand final brings the ultimate joy – but sometimes all that jubilation causes players to momentarily lose control. Here's our top five post-premiership celebration stuff-ups **BY STEVEN RUSSO**

Laurie Daley breaks the Winfield Cup

The Raiders legend has done everything imaginable in footy... even the rare distinction of being the only man to break both Norm Provan's leg and Arthur Summons' arm in one fell swoop. Not in real life, of course. But the man with the best hands in the game couldn't hold onto the Winfield Cup following Canberra's epic grand final win in 1989, destroying the game's Holy Grail when he dropped it off the back of a motorcade. "I hadn't been home to bed and I didn't have much strength to control the trophy," Daley said in 2011. "I remember sitting on the back of a ute in the parade in Queanbeyan and I wasn't quite prepared for the driver accelerating. I lost my footing as it sped up, and let the trophy go as I flew over the back and it smashed when it hit the ground."



Dylan Walker loses premiership ring

It took Souths 43 years to win back the premiership trophy... and it took Walker about a day to lose his premiership ring. Walker wrote himself into grand final celebration folklore when he dropped his \$8000 premiership ring while stripping down for a casual dip in Sydney Harbour last October. In a bizarre epilogue to the story, an identical ring was recovered in a Darwin drug raid five months later – although it was not Walker's missing bling. It turned out that it had been stolen from hooker Api Koroisau.



Wests Tigers' F-bomb faux pas

No doubt Tim Sheens would have considered mixing some soap into the celebratory champagne after a handful of Tigers treated home viewers to some colourful language during their post-grand final interviews in 2005. Pat Richards, Chris Heighington and Anthony Laffranchi let their emotions get the better of them while chatting with then-Channel Nine commentator Matthew Johns, dropping a truckload of expletives on live TV. In case you missed it, here are some of the more memorable quotes: "There was no way in the world I was going to miss this game, f****!" (Richards). "This is f****ing awesome." (Heighington). The Tigers later issued a press statement apologising for the players' language.

Rise and shine with Matty Johns

Speaking of Matt Johns, he came up with a memorable post-GF quote of his own following Newcastle's premiership triumph against Manly in 1997. With brother Andrew running around in the background like an inebriated chook, the elder Johns gave breakfast show *Sunrise* one of the funniest interviews you'll ever hope to see. When asked by reporter Natalie Barr to describe the feeling of coming back to Newcastle after their memorable win, Matty, clearly a little worse-for-wear following a whole night of partying, looked straight down the barrel of the camera and slurred, "It was better than Lego!" Hard to argue with that.



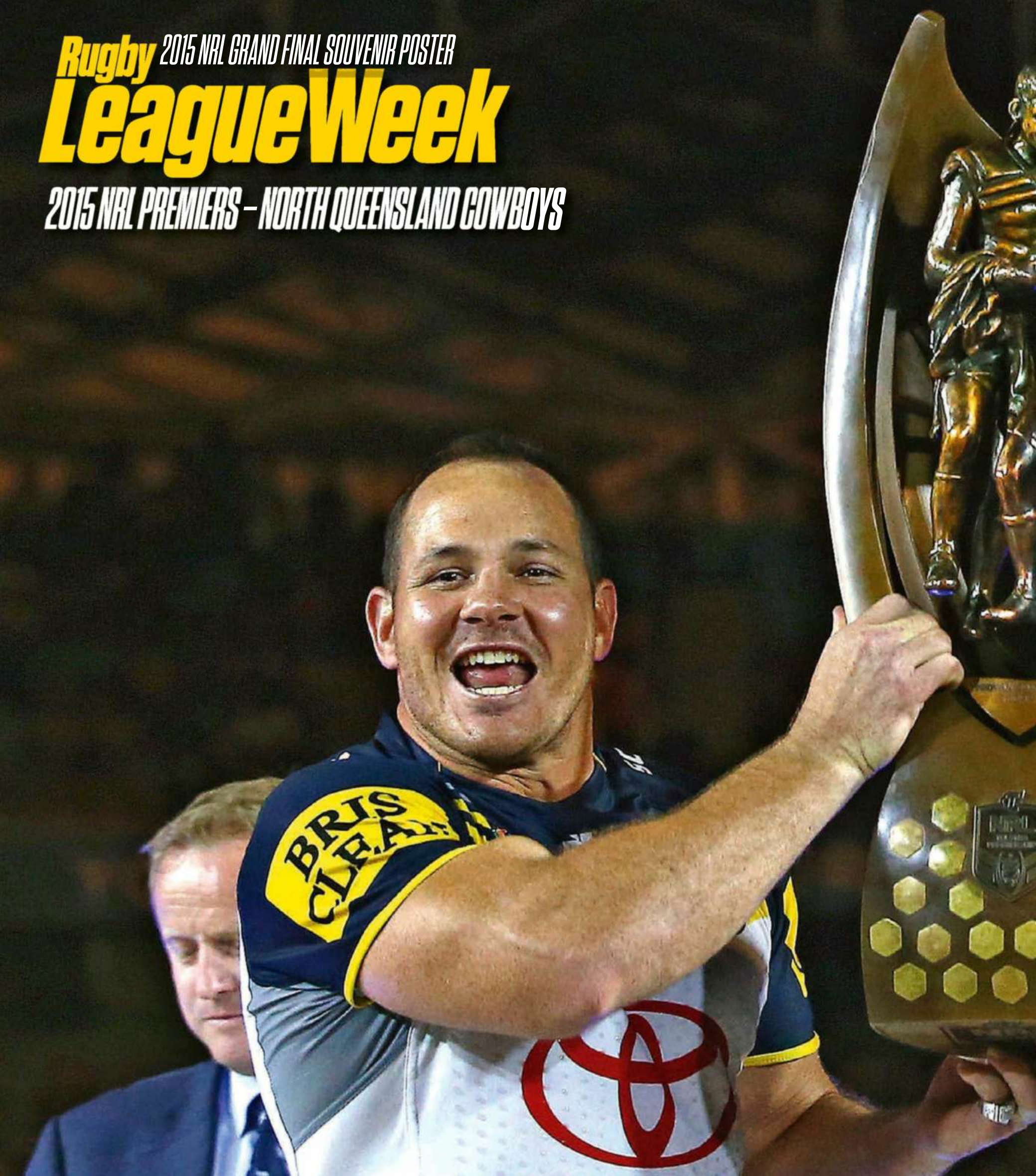
Bob goes off the rails

This one falls into the 'imagine what would happen if players did that today!' category. After Balmain stunned red-hot favourites Souths to win the 1969 grand final, fullback Bob Smithies hit the drink – big time. Shenanigans ensued, which left Tigers secretary Kevin Humphreys out of pocket and unimpressed. "One night we got blind drunk and the boys decided to put me on a train totally naked," Smithies told *RLW* in 2013. "I was so wasted I fell asleep and woke up when the train reached the end of the line at Kandos. The conductor had to wake me up. I must have

been a sight, laying in the carriage, totally naked. I had to ring Sydney from the police station across the road, reverse charges. I called Mr Humphreys, who came and got me... and he was angry. The police also presented him with a bill for my train ticket, some clothes and the phone call! It took him a while to forgive me."



Rugby 2015 NRL GRAND FINAL SOUVENIR POSTER
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2015: THE YEAR OF THE COWBOY

At last, Everest has been scaled. Of course, Johnathan Thurston has been to the summit once before – as an interchange player with the Bulldogs in 2004. But he made no secret of the fact that he craved another premiership. One *he* engineered. Last Sunday, the man who is arguably the finest player of his generation ticked off the final box on his rugby league resume. He couldn't do it alone, though. The Cowboys' historic maiden title was a credit to everyone at the club – and indeed everyone in the wider North Queensland region.

COWBOYS' YEAR IN PHOTOS



#WINNING

Clockwise from top left: The Provan-Summons Trophy isn't the only bit of silverware North Queensland claimed this year – they also won the Reconciliation Cup by downing the Bulldogs 23-16 at home in round nine; flying winger Antonio Winterstein was able to put aside the personal tragedy of losing little brother Francis in March to produce his best season in the top grade, scorching over for 16 tries . . . and it would have been 17, had the video ref not disallowed this one against Melbourne in the preliminary final; James Tamou had a slow start to the year, but hit his straps when it was needed most in the big games . . . and he was pretty pumped when he found form; hooker Jake Granville proved to be one of the buys of the year – his electric work from dummy half got the Cowboys on the front foot, and got the mop-haired hooker over the tryline 10 times; while Tamou was excited by the Cows' 2015 success, so too were their loyal fans, who loved every minute of NQ's charge to the title; Ethan Lowe was one of the most improved players of 2015 and a real unsung hero for the premiers.





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COWBOYS' YEAR IN PHOTOS



BATTERED... BUT BRILLIANT

Clockwise from top left: Star five-eighth Michael Morgan left Cowboys fans with their hearts in their mouths when he went down with an ankle injury against the Warriors in round 24 . . . fortunately, he would only miss two games before returning for the finals; Kyle Feldt laps up the win over Melbourne in the preliminary final – much to the delight of North Queensland fans . . . and the disdain of a few poor Storm troopers; Justin O'Neill flies high on a perfect Townsville afternoon; the faces of JT – the Cowboy King lets out a trademark giggle during the finals, but he wasn't laughing early in the year when North Queensland lost three straight and he was left looking like the Terminator after copping a knock to his eye; Lachlan Coote was an absolute beaut this year – after missing the entire 2014 season following knee surgery, his sweet skills and silky moves were a huge factor in North Queensland's title charge.



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THE FINALS CHARGE

Clockwise from right:
Matt Scott has set the platform for the Cowboys for the best part of the decade . . . and he certainly set the platform for their title march when he burst through the Sharks' defence in the opening minutes of the semi-final at 1300Smiles Stadium – North Queensland never looked back from that moment on; after triumphing over the Sharks 39-0 it was off to Melbourne – the match was a bit tighter, but when Michael Morgan strode away in the second half (much to Johnathan Thurston's delight), the Cows were on their way to the big one; their only hiccup throughout the finals was in week one against Brisbane, when the boys from the north were repelled by some tenacious Broncos defence – just like Jack Reed's desperate effort to prevent Kyle Feldt from scoring in the corner; North Queensland's wild ride thrilled their fans; Thurston delivers a quick message to his troops after full-time in Melbourne . . . not long after underrated second-rower Gavin Cooper's second try iced the 32-12 win.









THE KING AND HIS BLING

What a game. What a finish. JT – what a bloody legend! In a year when North Queensland made comeback wins an artform, it was fitting that they pulled the grand final out of the fire in the 80th minute. And how fitting that it was that man Thurston who iced the Cowboys' maiden title with a golden-point field goal. Few would begrudge JT his moment in the sun. Forget all the talk about whether or not the Cowboys skipper needed to lead his team to the title to earn the right to become an RLW Immortal. The fact is he's the best player of his era and thoroughly deserves that premiership ring that now sits snugly on his little finger. He became the first man since Peter Sterling back in 1986 to claim the Dally M Medal and Clive Churchill Medal in the same year. All hail King JT!

COWBOYS 17 BEAT BRONCOS 16 AT ANZ STADIUM / CROWD: 82,758

	TACKLES	MISSED TACKLES	LINEBREAKS	HIT-UPS/RUNS	METRES GAINED	HANDLING ERRORS	OFFLOADS	TRY ASSISTS	RLW RATING
 BRONCOS									
Darius Boyd	6	1	1	17	133	-	-	-	7
Corey Oates	5	1	-	16	203	2	-	-	7
Jack Reed	19	2	1	10	87	2	-	1	8
Justin Hodges	11	3	-	11	75	1	-	-	6
Jordan Kahu	3	1	-	12	90	-	-	-	6
Anthony Milford	13	3	3	15	192	-	1	-	8
Ben Hunt	20	4	1	5	65	4	1	-	5
Sam Thaiday	44	2	-	12	105	1	-	-	7
Andrew McCullough	50	2	-	4	27	-	-	-	7
Adam Blair	41	2	-	9	76	-	2	-	8
Alex Glenn	42	3	-	7	65	-	-	-	6
Matt Gillett	42	2	1	11	99	1	1	1	7
Corey Parker	44	2	-	18	169	-	2	-	8
INTERCHANGE									
Mitchell Dadds	14	-	-	5	47	-	-	-	5
Kodi Ikorima	8	1	-	2	10	-	1	-	3
Jarrod Wallace	17	-	-	10	90	-	-	-	7
Joe Ofahengaue	10	1	-	4	39	-	-	-	5
TOTAL	389	30	7	168	1572	11	8	2	110

	TACKLES	MISSED TACKLES	LINEBREAKS	HIT-UPS/RUNS	METRES GAINED	HANDLING ERRORS	OFFLOADS	TRY ASSISTS	RLW RATING
 COWBOYS									
Lachlan Coote	2	2	-	15	117	1	-	-	7
Kyle Feldt	4	3	1	10	81	1	-	-	7
Justin O'Neill	11	1	1	19	160	1	1	-	7
Kane Linnett	11	3	-	20	155	2	1	-	5
Antonio Winterstein	4	1	-	13	145	-	1	-	6
Michael Morgan	13	2	-	11	92	3	2	1	7
Johnathan Thurston	7	2	1	11	90	1	1	-	8
Matt Scott	27	5	-	12	102	-	-	-	7
Jake Granville	34	3	-	4	42	-	1	2	8
James Tamou	30	3	1	15	136	-	2	-	7
Gavin Cooper	39	4	-	10	81	-	-	-	7
Ethan Lowe	26	7	-	10	81	1	-	-	6
Jason Taumalolo	30	1	-	14	168	-	-	-	8
INTERCHANGE									
Scott Bolton	23	-	-	9	93	-	-	-	7
Ben Hamant	31	2	-	9	79	-	1	-	7
Rory Kostjasyn	22	2	-	-	-	1	-	-	5
John Asiata	18	3	-	9	67	-	1	-	5
TOTAL	332	44	4	191	1689	11	11	3	114

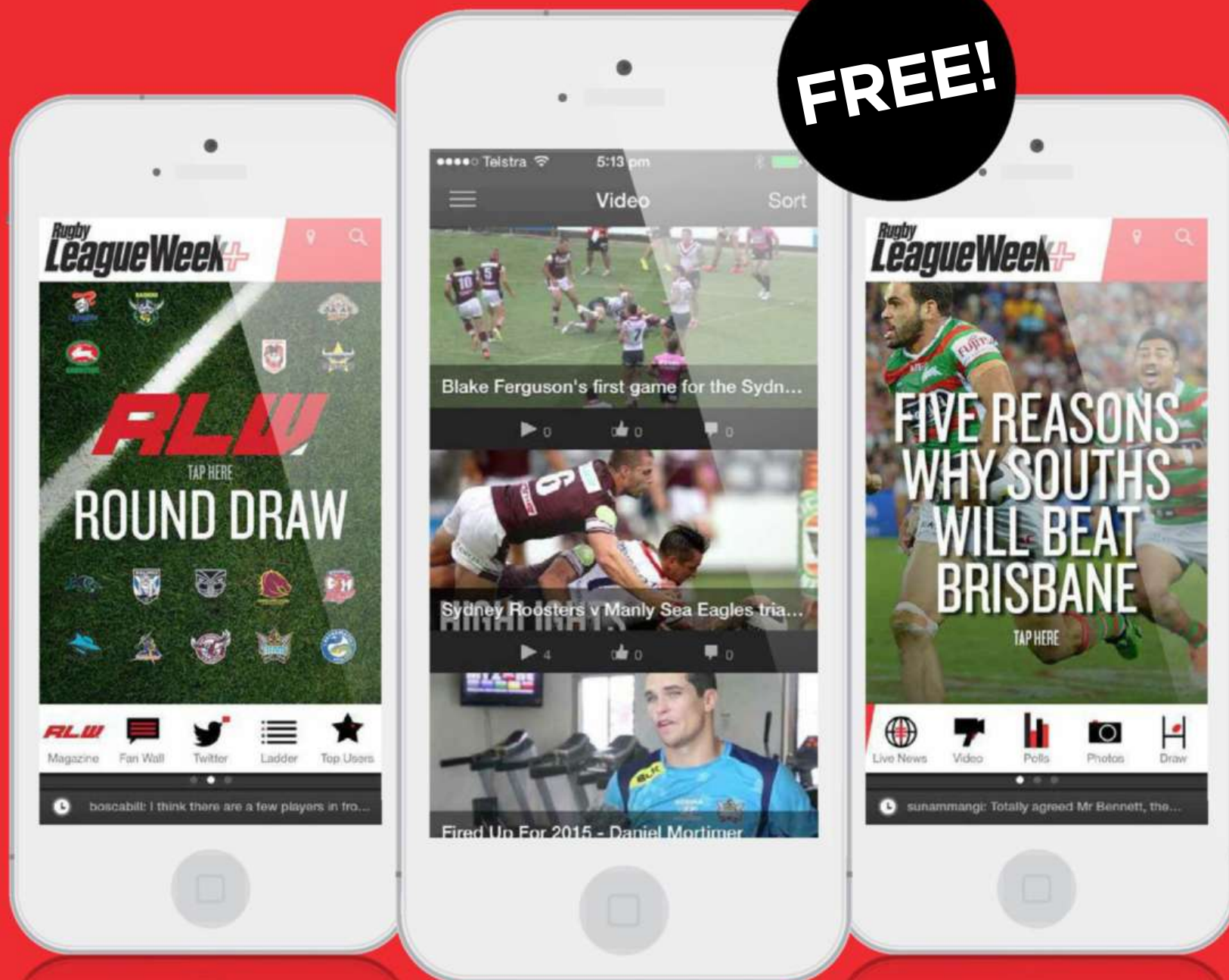
RLW RATINGS: MITCHELL DALE

COWBOYS 17 (O'Neill, Tamou, Feldt tries; Thurston 2 goals, Thurston field goal) **beat BRONCOS 16** (Oates, Reed tries; Parker 2, Kahu 2 goals).
Goalkeepers: Cowboys - Thurston 2 from 3. Broncos - Parker 2 from 2, Kahu 2 from 2. Penalties: Broncos 9-4.
WHEN THEY SCORED: 6 min: Broncos 2-0 (Parker goal). 8 min: Broncos 8-0 (Oates try, Parker goal). 12 min: Broncos 8-6 (O'Neill try, Thurston goal). 26 min: Cowboys 12-8 (Tamou try, Thurston goal). 35 min: Broncos 14-12 (Reed try, Kahu goal). 43 min: Broncos 16-12 (Kahu goal). 80 min: 16-all (Feldt try). 83 min: Cowboys 17-16 (Thurston field goal).



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PURR-FECT PAN

The black cats from the golden west break up a day of maroon dominance

BY TOM SMITH

ON A GRAND FINAL DAY tinted a deep shade of maroon, the Penrith Panthers' Holden Cup team reminded us that Sydney's west is still one hell of a junior nursery.

Victories to the Cowboys in the NRL decider and Ipswich in the State Championship mean Penrith's Holden Cup is the only piece of rugby league silverware remaining south of the Tweed.

The Panthers defeated Tom Trbojevic's Sea Eagles 34-18 to collect Penrith's second Under-20s title in three years, having claimed the 2013 crown with a side featuring Bryce Cartwright and Dallin Watene-Zelezniak.

The trophy is no less than the Panthers deserve after dominating the season from start to finish. They lost only four games to run away with the minor premiership, then beat Manly 44-24 and the Warriors 50-16 on their way to a consummate victory in the decider. And while Manly sensation Trbojevic ran hot as the mercury soared above 34 degrees, the Panthers were forced to do it the hard way.

Regular captain and halfback Nathan Cleary, son of Penrith NRL coach Ivan, watched from the stands after choosing to represent the Australian Schoolboys in their two-match series against New Zealand – but deputy No.7 Jarome Luai stepped up with aplomb, scoring one twinkle-toed try and setting up another.

"Big shoes to fill for me, Nat's played a big role in our team," says the 18-year-old Luai, who made his NYC debut in round 20 and is yet to taste defeat in eight games.

"Ciro (coach Cameron Ciraldo) spoke to me about stepping up and leading the boys around the park, and just being confident in myself – and the boys have followed.

"It's been an amazing experience."



Luai iced the result on the hour mark when he unleashed a flurry of sidesteps that would have looked right at home on the stage of Riverdance, dodging half a dozen defenders on his way to the stripe to open up an unassailable 28-12 lead. It was enough to steal the show

from Trbojevic, who introduced himself to NRL fans this year with nine silky first-grade appearances. Trbojevic enhanced his reputation with another virtuoso performance in the Under-20s decider, bagging one four-pointer – his 29th in 22 games in all grades this season – and having two others disallowed.

"He's an amazing player and he's all over the park, so he was a big X-factor for us to shut him down," Luai says. "This week, we based our defensive patterns around how he plays, so we were ready for him.

"His first half was pretty big, and we knew we had to do a job on him in the second half... we did that well but he played well today."

ON SONG

Second-string halfback Jarome Luai (inset) lit up ANZ Stadium as the Panthers marched to their second Under-20s premiership in three seasons last Sunday.

ANTHERS



Penrith's task was made harder when NRL-experienced centre Robert Jennings limped off early in the second half with an ankle injury, but the Chocolate Soldiers refused to melt in the heat. The Panthers kept their cool with a couple of club legends in their corner – 1991 premiership-winning coach Phil Gould and club legend Royce Simmons both addressed the

squad during the week to pass on some nuggets of wisdom.

"It was huge. They've been there and done that so it's good to hear their experiences and how they feel and how they cope with this sort of week," says Luai, who also steered Patrician Brothers Blacktown to the grand final of the GIO Schoolboys Cup last month.

"They said just to stay calm, let it all sink in, take it as it comes, and make the most of it. It was good advice from them.

"Phil Gould's been awesome since he's come to Penrith and he's putting time into every grade – and it's paying off."

The grand final win was just reward for first-year coach Ciraldo, who took the NYC reins at the start of the year after a stint with this same group of players at SG Ball level.

"We're very lucky that we've got a lot of kids that play footy out here and it's just good to be a part of it," says the former Sharks, Knights and Panthers back-rower. "All of them have the talent to (play NRL). Hopefully they get an opportunity over the next one or two years. We've had a big squad and everyone who's come in to do a job has done it really well."

With 12 of the 17 title-winning Panthers eligible to suit up in the Under-20s again next year, the Panthers are certain to remain a force under Ciraldo in 2016.

Nathan Cleary hopes so – he's hungry to taste that premiership feeling after trading a Holden Cup winners medal for an Australian Schoolboys jumper. The Schoolboys squared off against the Kiwis on the Thursday before the preliminary final, and again last Thursday. Cleary could not play both, leaving him with a difficult decision.

"It was definitely a tough choice, and it just made it harder watching the boys win," Cleary says.

"But that was part of the reason I made the decision to leave, because I knew there'd be back-up and I knew they'd get the job done. It's a great team, and we're hoping to put together a pretty good team next year as well – and I can get a shot out there." RLW

Panthers 34 (S.Luke, T.May, R.Jennings, M.Filino, J.Luai, F.Enese tries; D.Edwards 5 goals) **beat Sea Eagles 18** (T.Trbojevic, L.Garner, L.Knight tries; H.Pratt 3 goals).
Jack Gibson Medallist: Soni Luke (Panthers).

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Lander the brave!

Jets soar to send their inspirational skipper out in style **BY JOEL GOULD**

“HE PUTS HIS HEAD where you wouldn’t put a heavily armed car.”

Ipswich Jets co-coach Shane Walker paid this tribute to his retiring captain Keiron Lander after he inspired a gutsy 26-12 NRL State Championship grand final win against the Knights.

The 28-year-old lock is the toast of his team-mates, his club and the rugby league-mad city of Ipswich.

Lander saved his best for last and came up with what will be remembered as one of the great grand final tackles.

With the Jets ahead 14-6 and defending their line a minute from half-time last Sunday, a crunching hit by Lander on big Knights forward Marvin Filipo broke the game open.

He launched himself like a missile . . . and it was a bullseye. The ball spilled loose and Marmin Barba raced 90m to give the Jets a 20-6 half-time lead.

“Keiron turned that game on its head,” a jubilant Shane Walker says. “He’s such a courageous player. When they made him they broke the mould. He’s as tough as old dog’s nuts.

“When that big second-rower ran at him he didn’t care for his body.

“He threw himself at him, the ball popped out and it went out to

Marmin to score. That try gave us breathing space.”

The last thing Lander did on a football field is put his head right in front of the body of a Knights player’s hip to force a dropout.

He copped a bloodied and bruised lip for his troubles and could hardly speak after the match.

“I put my body on the line and I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Lander says, through clenched teeth but with a wry smile.

“People say that I lead with my head. Well, if I do, it gets people to drop the ball, or ‘drop out’.

“I’ll lead with it every day of the week if we get a result like that.

“This is the best ending I could hope for. It’s one I have worked hard for and one I will hold dear for the rest of my life.

“Now I’m going to take all my experience and share it with other young fellas and hopefully they can have a similar ride to what I have.”

Shane Walker likes to say that “there is no quit in the Ipswich Jets”.

Two one-on-one tackles by hooker Matt Parcell and winger Richard Pandia to save certain tries epitomised that saying.

“That is rugby league. That is the Jets,” Lander says.

“It is that never-say-die attitude we have. Unless you are mates and unless you are brothers you don’t defend for each other like that.

“We’re family here.

“I’m so proud of the boys and so happy for Ben and Shane.”



Parcell, who will join Manly next year, was the man of the match for his exciting running game and outstanding defence. It was a performance that spoke volumes about how he feels about Lander.

“Keiron has been so good for this club and will be sorely missed,” Parcell says. “It was a great way to send him out.”

“He comes up with the big play when we need it. It’s all or nothing and he’s done it so many times.

“This last few months have been great and I have really enjoyed playing with the boys, knowing this is the last opportunity I will get.

“To think, 12 to 18 months ago – or even seven weeks ago – that we would be here is just surreal.”

GREEN AND WHITE, AND DYNAMITE

Ipswich Jets players gave generously for retiring captain Keiron Lander’s (right) going-away gift – the State Championship trophy.



Co-coach Ben Walker has no doubt 22-year-old Parcell is going to be a gun at Manly.

"Matt is a standout in our comp and, from experience, the top players in the Intrust Super Cup in the past like Cameron Munster and Jake Granville are standouts in the NRL," Walker says.

"I have no doubt Matt will be a standout for Manly.

"I have had a few phone calls from a few people at Manly who are pretty chuffed at their signing. They were on the phone straight away after his five tries in our first final.

"We knew we had a good one when he turned up five years ago as a 17-year-old and he has busted his guts to get to where he is now."

The Jets will be given the keys to the city of Ipswich this week, just like local legends Allan Langer and Kevin and Kerrod Walters were in 1992 after the Broncos won their maiden premiership.

After claiming the Intrust Super Cup title a fortnight ago, it has without doubt been the season of the Jet. **RLW**

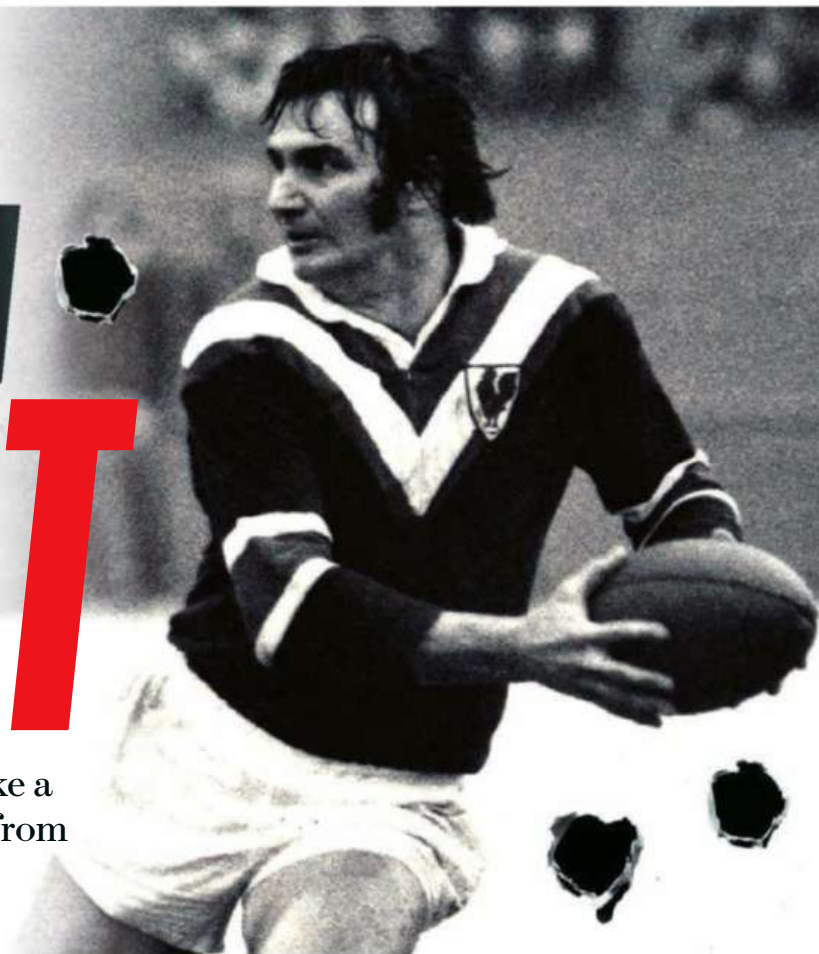
Ipswich 26 (M.Barba, M.Parcell, R.Griffin, B.McConnachie tries; C.Anderson 5 goals) **beat Newcastle 12** (J.Feeney, G.Ndaira tries; Ndaira 2 goals).

Man of the match: Matt Parcell (Ipswich).



PRIZED CHOOK COULD HAVE BEEN DEAD MEAT

The great John Brass recalls the day he feared he might have to take a bullet for his team – a *real* bullet, that is – in this exclusive extract from the new book, *The House that Jack Built*, the story of the Roosters' golden era in the 1970s



DUAL INTERNATIONAL JOHN Brass had every right to be feel 10-feet tall and bulletproof in the September of 1975.

The gifted centre was in the form of his life, a star in what many still consider the greatest club team of all time. An Eastern Suburbs juggernaut rolling towards back-to-back grand final glory after 20 wins in their past 21 premiership games (including a record 19 straight).

But in the lead-up to the decider against St George, the 28-year-old felt anything but bulletproof, as David Rowlands writes in *The House that Jack Built* . . .

THERE WAS ONE PERSON WHO DID not want to see him turn out in the match that mattered most. That was made clear

from his initial phone call to the Brass household, which came on the Monday night prior to the grand final.

While Brass was at training, his wife answered a call that chilled her to the bone. The message from the unknown voice was straight to the point: if her husband ran onto the Sydney Cricket Ground on Saturday afternoon, he would be shot.

Brass told coach Jack Gibson the following day, but didn't receive much sympathy from his team-mates. "The guys were taking the piss, of course, saying they'll leave a big space for me when we run out just in case he's a dud shot."

Initially, it may have been mildly amusing and easily dismissed as a one-off crank call, however the calls kept coming in the evenings that followed.

John's wife was told that if her husband ran onto the SCG on Saturday afternoon, he would be shot

"It kept going and we ended up having police come around every night because I was at training pretty much every night of the week. (The police) said it was probably some nutter who's had \$10 on the game."

The unflappable Brass had managed to put it in the back of his mind by the time that game day arrived. After watching a motivational film at Easts Leagues Club, the team made the short trip to Moore Park together on a bus.

Stern and focused with their heads down, the squad was eager to get through the throng of "50 to 100" fans that greeted them when they alighted and reached the SCG dressing room. Then a lone voice pierced the din: "Don't forget what I've been saying on the phone!"

Brass didn't see the speaker, but immediately broke into a cold sweat and thought, 'Shit, there's some nutter in the Members Stand!' He immediately informed his coach and "next thing there was police everywhere".

The authorities barred Easts from having the traditional pre-grand final team photo taken at the back of the Ladies Pavilion and instead it was done in the confines of the dressing-room, leaving Brass looking a little spooked.

The superstar centre then became the first and probably only player to run out for a game with a police escort.

To this day, Brass does not know why he was targeted. One explanation may have been it was an attempt by a desperate Dragons supporter to put him off his goal-kicking, however the side's top pointscorer had already been absolved of that responsibility a few weeks earlier,

with Gibson electing to stick with John Peard, who booted eight from eight in the preliminary final against Manly, which Brass missed due to a virus.

The hoax caller was never identified and nor were any shots of the ballistic kind fired at the SCG on September 20, 1975.

Despite the drama, Brass managed to not only keep himself composed but also his new rookie centre-partner John Rheinberger, who had come in after Mark Harris broke his ankle seven days earlier.

Brass capped a memorable afternoon by coming up with two second-half tries as the Roosters ran riot.

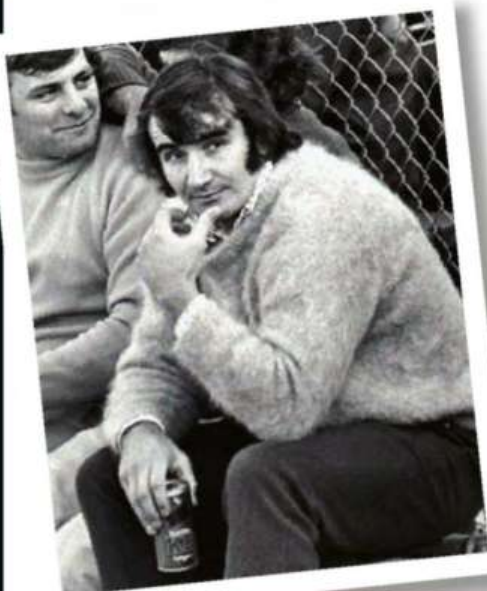
"Well it all happened very quickly because it was only 5-0 at half-time," Brass said of the unfolding 38-0 massacre.

"I think we scored four tries in less than 20 minutes and it was one of the few opportunities in a grand final – I played a few in rugby and in league – where you actually had a chance to look in the stands, take it all in and enjoy the afternoon. It became a fairly relaxing last 20 minutes."

It sounds like that was exactly what Brass needed after one of the most stressful lead-ups to a grand final that any player has ever had to endure. **RLW**

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The House that Jack Built
about Jack Gibson's champion
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'I messed it up last year ... I owe the lads'

Wigan prop Ben Flower became famous for all the wrong reasons in the 2014 Super League decider and he's determined to make amends **BY PHIL WILKINSON**

BEN FLOWER IS AIMING TO complete the road to grand final redemption this weekend. The Welsh prop made headlines around the world after being red-carded for punching Lance Hohaia in last year's Old Trafford decider.

Now, Flower will be thrust back under the spotlight at the venue where he made sporting infamy as Wigan prepare for a title showdown against Leeds.

"It's massive, with what happened last year," Flower admits.

"I will be nervous but I know I've got to focus on the job. The slate is clean and I'm in a new season, so I just want to get on with my rugby now and forget about that."

Flower has played 18 times for Wigan since serving his six-month ban, and insists he has emerged a different person.

But he still blames himself for last year's 14-6 defeat to fierce rivals St Helens, and is desperate to atone for his mistake.

"I'm definitely a stronger person in myself," the 27-year-old says. "I've gone through some bad times, but I've come through the other side and I'm happy with where I'm at."

"Regardless of the outcome, there will be some tears shed with the relief of getting through this season."

"I'm just happy to be back playing and want to get the win for the boys."

"I messed it up last year, it was solely down to me."

"I owe the lads. They got me back there and I'll do my best for them."

"I will play my heart out when we're on the field."

Flower told team-mates before last Thursday's semi-final against Huddersfield he owed it to them to help them return to the Super League decider.

And he made an early impact, scoring a barnstorming try on their way to a 32-8 victory, with Cowboys hero Matty Bowen kicking six goals.



With domestic silverware eluding Bowen throughout his 15-season career, the 33-year-old is hoping to match his old North Queensland mates and win his own grand final before hanging up the boots.

"We've been playing for this all year, and now to come down to just one more game ... I can't wait," says Bowen, the only overseas player in Wigan's probable line-up.

This is Wigan's third successive grand final and, either by accident

FLOWER POWER

Wigan prop Ben Flower is desperate to make amends for his brain snap in last year's Super League decider (right).



or design, they appear to be finding their groove at the right stage.

They boast an all-England back row of Liam Farrell, Joel Tomkins and Sean O'Loughlin, and a slick backline including Roosters-bound Joe Burgess.

"You couldn't write this, could you?" Burgess says. "To leave with a grand final is the ultimate, and I'm desperate to walk off with a ring on my finger."

But Leeds have plenty of motivation themselves, with talisman Jamie Peacock and captain Kevin Sinfield leaving the club.

Sinfield kicked a vital 40-20 to help the Rhinos battle from behind and beat St Helens 20-13 in the other semi last weekend.

"That performance was nine out of 10, with the high level of intensity," coach Brian McDermott says. "It's fantastic to be back at the grand final. I feel excited and privileged."

Leeds have already won the Challenge Cup and League Leaders' Shield (minor premiership) this season as they chase the first clean sweep in their history.

But they have never beaten Wigan in a major final, and with both sides claiming two wins each from their four meetings this year, bookmakers were unable to pick a favourite in the early markets.

A crowd of around 70,000 is expected at Old Trafford for the decider, which takes place at the same time – and across Manchester – from where England will face Uruguay in the Rugby World Cup.

Both finalists will face NRL opposition next February in the World Club Series, and if Wigan defeat Leeds this Sunday, they'll be rewarded with a clash against Bowen's former club, the Cowboys.

"I was only thinking about that the other night, actually," Bowen smiles.

"Who would I cheer for? I don't know. I honestly don't know."

A diplomat until the end. **RLW**

SAINT KEIRON

BORN

October 28, 1976,
St Helens, UK.

CLUB FOOTY

St Helens 1994-2010,
496 games, 175 tries,
700 points.

REP FOOTY

Wales 1995-96, 1998
& 2000-01, 7 Tests,
2 tries, 8 points &
6 internationals, 5 tries,
20 points; Great Britain
1996, 1998-99, 2002,
2005-06, 16 Tests, 1 try,
4 points.

GRAND TOTAL

525 matches, 183 tries,
732 points

- Played junior football with Wigan St Judes.
- Played in Super League grand final-winning teams for St Helens in 1996, 1999, 2000, 2002 and 2006.
- Played in Challenge Cup-winning teams for St Helens in 1996, 1997, 2001, 2004, 2006, 2007 and 2008.
- Played in World Club Challenge-winning teams for St Helens in 2001 and 2007.



Champion British hooker Keiron Cunningham rose above a tough and tragic upbringing to become the pride of Merseyside

By PHIL WILKINSON

'A lot of people told me I was never going to be a rugby player. People told me I was never going to do anything with my life'

What was your upbringing like?

I'm from a family of 10, the youngest of the lot – I think my mum was 45 when she had me. We were a working-class family and my dad used to work down the pit. We lived on a council estate and did it tough, but it probably gave me enough determination to get off there and do well.

How did you get involved in rugby league?

All my brothers played to some extent. Edward played for Great Britain and Wigan, won the Lance Todd Trophy (as man of the match in a Challenge Cup final), Tommy played for Warrington and Saints a little bit . . . others played at lower levels. I started playing when I was seven. I was a little bit of a tearaway, but one thing that always brought me down to earth was playing footy. But I lost my dad when I was 10, and when he passed I sort of gave the game away a little bit, and turned into an even worse little person. I squared myself up a bit when I was 13 or 14, I got back into the game and never looked back from there.

What were your early days at St Helens like?

Lynette, my girlfriend then and my current wife – I've been with her since I was 14 – she got pregnant. I was 17 years old, my girlfriend was pregnant, I didn't live in the family home anymore – my mum pushed me out the door – so I was sleeping on my girlfriend's couch, and I didn't know where my future was. I didn't know what I was going to do. I was working two jobs. I used to fit double-glazed windows during the day, starting at six in the morning, finish at six at night, then run down to Saints in my work gear, throw my training gear on, do all my training and then I'd run home, get a bath and then go to sleep. That was my life for 12 months. I was determined to do something.

You moved from back row to hooker and soon made your mark on the first team . . .

I had that drive from every angle. I wanted to get out of that council estate and I wanted to do well for myself.



KING KEIRON: Cunningham is regarded as one of England's best-ever, having starred for both St Helens and Great Britain.

I had a girlfriend I loved and cherished, a daughter born, and a lot to fight for. A lot of people told me I was never going to be a rugby player. From family members to schoolteachers to past coaches to everybody. People told me I was never going to do anything with my life. Hard work brought me through the other side of probably a lot of pitfalls when I was a kid.

What was it like to be in the Saints side which broke Wigan's decade of dominance?

In '95 we played Wigan in a Regal Trophy final. We got beaten but for us to make a final was like, 'This is what success tastes like. This is what being part of a great club feels like'. Shaun McRae came in for the start of '96, fine-tuned a few things, brought a couple of new players in and that was the start of our dominance. We won the first Super League in 1996 and then we just never looked back.

How close were you ever to testing yourself in the NRL?

I nearly went, twice. Just before I'd come through the ranks, I was obviously a talent when I was a kid and a lot of rumblings were going on in Australia about me. I spoke to the Roosters and Illawarra Steelers, as they were then, but I signed a contract with Saints. Then in 2005,

after a Tri-Series, I had a really good series against a lot of good players. I had a lot of interest – a lot of agents ringing me up. It's tough because I love St Helens, I love England, I love the climate, I love the cold and I love the rain. To walk away from all of that to go to Australia where it was hot, well . . . I hate the heat, and there are loads of stuff that can kill you! It's too poisonous! But yeah, I did seriously consider it in 2005. I was in really good form, and there was a part of me that regretted not going testing myself against the best in the world. Is that just for ego? Probably. And I've also been fortunate enough to be part of some great St Helens sides, win lots of great trophies and create some memories which I never would have created (had I gone).

Internationally, you also represented Wales – and went close to beating Australia in the 2000 World Cup . . .

We had a chucked-together team! I had my mate Baz from down the road, I even think we had a couple of Aussies who came from the bush, who'd had a couple of leeks or seen a corgi and that qualified them for Wales! That was the side. And we went in at half-time and were actually beating the Aussies (by 20-8). I'll never forget, we had a couple of second-division players and they were jumping for joy and screaming in the dressing-room.

I was looking around and I was like, 'We've not done anything'. I hoped for the best, but I expected the backlash in the second-half (Australia won 46-22).

There's a statue of you outside Saints' new ground, Langtree Park. Is it weird going to work and walking past your own statue?!

I don't really have the words to put across for that. I'm a local lad, I love rugby league and I'm a big fan – the same as everyone else. To be held in that regard by the people of the town and everybody involved in it was a massive honour – a real massive honour. Generally it only happens to people who have passed away, which is another massive bonus . . . unless they were going to tell me something I didn't want to know! At least I know my grandkids will be around when I'm around and they can say, 'He was a pretty decent player'.

How did you find the transition into coaching?

I always swore I was never going to be a coach because rugby league consumes your life. It consumes every facet, and when things don't go well and you get a lot of stick and the fans are against you and people are slagging you off . . . I always said to my wife as soon as I finish I'm away, I'm out of the sport. It always felt like your life was never your own. I wanted that ownership back of my life and I didn't want to be involved with rugby. I was actually thinking of going down the strength and conditioning route. I did that for a few months, but (former St Helens coach) Royce Simmons introduced me to a little bit of the team stuff, and when Royce opened the door it opened his eyes slightly to what knowledge I had of the game. I really got the bug. I knew I was far from the finished article – I'm still far from being the finished article. I needed to be nurtured by a good coach and I sort of led the chairman down the path of Nathan Brown. I learned a lot from him. I still confide in Nathan, he's my mentor and I speak to him a lot. **PLW**



DOES IT GET ANY BETTER

Argument will rage on about whether it is the *best ever*, but the Cowboys' great escape surely belongs in the grand final of great grand finals

MOVE OVER, BENJI, YOU now have the company of Michael Morgan in the 'Greatest Flick Pass in Grand Final History' category. And while we're making room for Cowboys heroes, Kyle Feldt can slide in comfortably next to Newcastle's Darren Albert for 'The Most Incredible Last-Minute Try in a Decider'.

And what's more, the epic 1989 grand final between Canberra and Balmain must surely make room on the mantelpiece for 2015 to be placed alongside it. Let the debate rage as to whether the Cowboys-Broncos classic should knock Big Mal,

Steve Jackson and co off altogether . . . they are the sort of arguments we *should* be having in rugby league!

First to Morgan, and the audacious right-hand flick to put Feldt away with time all but up last Sunday night. Ringed in by three defenders and seemingly out of time and ideas, Morgan manufactured a magical pass that gave his winger a saloon passage to level the scores at 16-all.

And just as Albert did back in '97, Feldt touched down one-handed and leapt for joy as the Cowboys produced the greatest of all their great escapes to give their inspirational skipper a chance to ice the game from the sideline.

History will record that JT hit the upright and the game was forced into the cruel punishment we call golden point. One dropped kick-off and four tackles later, Thurston had his moment and his premiership as he coolly slotted a field goal to break Broncos hearts and send Cowboys fans into a frenzy.

This was sporting theatre at its best and it was fitting that the ultimate A-Lister should have the last word. He had probed and schemed throughout a pulsating second half but Adam Blair and Sam Thaiday were having none of it, sitting the champ on his backside with two bell-ringers as time ran down.

In the end, though, destiny was with JT and his band of loyal lieutenants, led by Matt Scott and James Tamou up front and the elusive Morgan out wide.

After coming so close a decade ago when The Benji Flick and a case of stage fright had brought them undone, this was the Cowboys' night.

A night when Queenslanders took over Sydney and generated a grand final atmosphere like no other. A night when Morgan and Feldt took possession of their own piece of grand final history. And a night when JT finally lured Lady Luck to the altar after she had jilted him three years in a row. **RLW**

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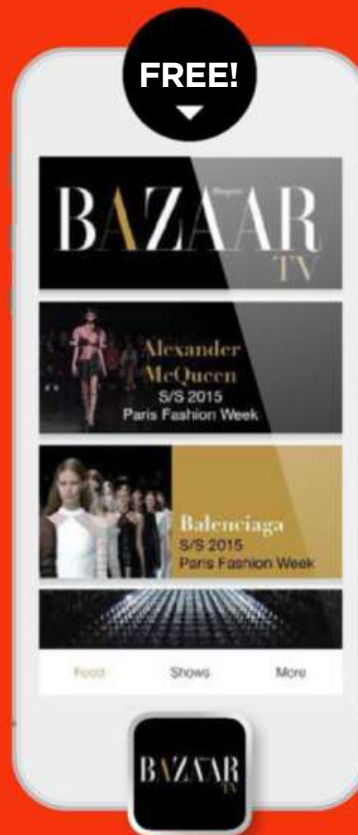




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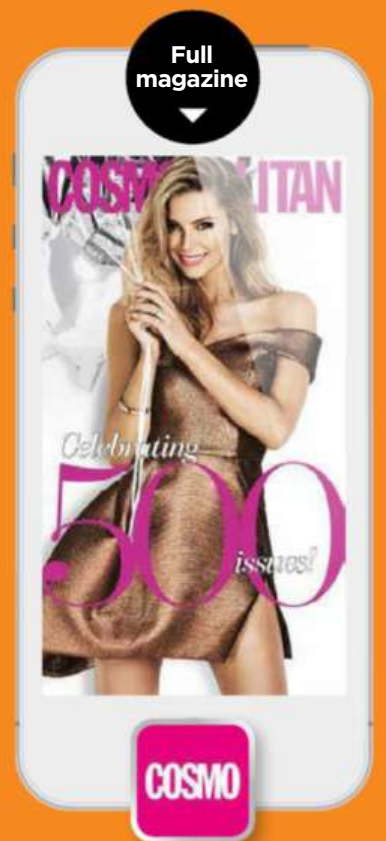
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